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A MERCURY PUBLICATION

HUGH PENTECOST DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

OCTAVUS ROY COHEN ERSKINE CALDWELL

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WINNER OF A THIRD PRIZE

Dorothy Salisbury Davis's original title for "Born Killer" was "The Night Singer," and it is under the original title that we can best tell you of the story's origin and background . . . It evolved from a mood — a mood remembered by Mrs. Davis out of her childhood spent in northern Wisconsin. Back in her childhood she had favorite sounds and favorite smells and favorite trees and favorite pets, and they all came back to her memory while she was exploring the past — especially the pets, from the lame chicken to the blind horse. All are gone now, and in their place is a deep loneliness — although, as Mrs. Davis is so aware, we sometimes feel loneliness without knowing the word for it. And yet are the favorites of the past really gone? Are not the memories of childhood always with us, and through those memories the things themselves? Have not the sounds and smells and trees and pets and all the other wonders of childhood simply become, in Mrs. Davis's maturity, the "Night Singer"? If that is true, Mrs. Davis is sure they won't mind having been transformed — she thought every single one of them was beautiful . . .

BORN KILLER

by DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

THERE IS A SORT OF LEGEND ABOUT Corporal George Orbach. More than one man of his outfit has summed him up as the only person he ever met who didn't know what fear was. They have a good many pat explanations, the way men will when they have nothing to do between patrols but pin labels on one another. "A born killer" is a favorite. A lieutenant called it "a suicidal complex." This particular phrase did not take with the men. A handful of sleeping pills, a loaded .32, they figure, and he could have died in bed without scurvy, without frostbite, and without Migs.

He was up once for rotation and asked to stay. Forced into regulation five-day leaves in Japan, he walks the streets there, striding along them like a farmer behind a plow who sees neither birds nor trees nor sky except to measure the daylight left in them. The one piece of information about himself which he ever volunteered was the remark: "I'll bet I've walked more than any goddam soldier in the infantry."

No one doubted it, which is strange only in the fact that George Orbach

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is just nineteen years old. He lied about his age when he signed up. At sixteen he said he was twenty-one, and the recruiting officer studied him trying to decide which way he was lying. He was bent like a man with something on his back and his eyes were old; but his skin was smooth and his dirty, nervous hands boy's hands.

"Home?"

"U.S.A."

"Where were you born, wise guy?"

"Masonville, Wisconsin. Ever hear of it?"

"They'll clip your tongue in the army, farm boy. Why don't you take a haircut?"

"I don't have any money."

"Family?"

"Don't have any."

"That's a shame. You ought to have an insurance beneficiary."

"What insurance?"

"What they make you take out before you go overseas."

"Look, Mister . . ."

"Sir!"

"Sir. I got a sister. Put her down for it. Elizabeth Orbach, Route 3, Masonville, Wisconsin."

"That's better. How did you get to New York?"

"I walked."

"Fair game for the infantry. Got a police record, Orbach?"

"No, sir."

The recruiting sergeant watched him closely. "They'll extradite you if you have."

George slurred the word wearily. "I don't think they'll extradite me."

"Think it over." The sergeant gave him a card. "If you still want to join up, be at this address at 8 o'clock tomorrow morning."

George was born in violence, in a storm that tore great pines out by the roots and so flattened the tall white birches that ten years later George himself, then given to visualizing good and evil, counted the stricken birches pure white souls bowed by the devil, as he scrambled over them on his shortcut home from Sunday school. But on the night he was born, his father killed a horse racing him to Masonville to bring the doctor. Electric wires were down, the phone dead, the truck useless on the washed-out road. George and his mother were attended by Elizabeth, twelve years old. George lived. His mother died.

Elizabeth learned more in going over George's lessons with him than she had in attending school herself. She was more delighted with his first, second, and third readers than he was, and when he was nine or so, he could not quite understand her pleasure in them. By then Elizabeth was over twenty, which to George meant that there was less difference in age between Elizabeth and their father than between his sister and himself.

"Do you believe all that about giants and princes?" he asked her more than once.

"They're nice," she would say. "They're real pretty. I like them."

Mike Orbach, who read only the Masonville weekly, *Hoard's Dairy-*

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man, and the Bible, would shake his head. He should have liked to see her reading the Bible, but all he ever said was, "You just read whatever you like, honey. You got it coming to you."

George was further puzzled when, bringing home a geography and then a history, and books called literature which he could now read himself, he found Elizabeth still smiling over his tattered primers.

The world was at war then, and even to the backwoods of Wisconsin the mobile blood-bank units came. Across the lake, five of the Bergson boys went into service, but four were left and nothing changed very much. At the church basket-suppers there were more women than men, and Elizabeth was not unusual in having her father take her to the dances. Nor did she mind sitting them out. She smiled and nodded as the dancers passed her and clapped her hands when a couple did an elaborate bow before her.

"She's so good-natured," George overheard Mrs. Bergson say once. "God's been kinder to them than he has to lots of us."

George could not see where the kindness of God had much to do with it. He was fourteen and going by bus to the township high school. Every day when he came home Elizabeth would have his dinner warm on the back of the stove — meat, potatoes, and vegetables, always in the one pot. It didn't have much taste, he discovered, after his lunches in the school cafeteria.

"Can't you put some sugar or salt or something in it, Liz?" he said one day.

The next day there were both sugar and salt, and more of them than his stomach could take. His father had come in from the barn for a cup of tea, for he liked to hear George tell of school as much as Elizabeth did. He scowled when George pushed the plate away.

"For Cripe's sake, Liz, what did you do to this?"

"Eat it," his father said quietly.

Elizabeth went out to the icebox in the back kitchen.

"I can't, Pa," George said.

"God damn you, eat it and keep your mouth shut!"

He had not heard his father swear before. He pulled the plate back and swallowed one mouthful after another, trying to deaden the taste with tea.

Elizabeth returned and watched him. "Sugar and salt," she said.

"It's swell," George murmured.

He went to his room to change his clothes, and changing them, caught sight of himself in the mirror. He moved close to it and examined his face. There was fuzz on his upper lip and on his chin. He twisted his neck that he might see himself from other angles. He was blond like his sister, but there all resemblance that he could find ended. He wondered which one — his sister or himself — did not belong in the family. The possibility that he might be an orphan did not hurt so much as the thought that

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there might be no bond of family between Elizabeth and him. But there was; he was sure of that. As long as he could remember, Liz had been taking care of him. He could remember her brushing his hair. Then he distinctly remembered his father taking the comb to part it. Liz put his shoes on when he was a child. His father tied the laces.

His face, as he stared at it, seemed to quiver — as though someone were jiggling the glass. He thrust himself into his work clothes and rushed out of the house. His father had already let the cows in and now was in the loft shoveling hay down the chute. The cows nearest it were straining in their stanchions, the metal of their collars jangling.

George measured their grain, and until the last one was fed they snorted and bellowed greedily. It was his practice to start at opposite ends on alternate days, and he was always annoyed that they had no appreciation of his fairness. That day he didn't care.

His father eased himself down the chute, dropping on the hay.

"You'll hurt yourself doing that, Pa. You should walk around."

"I was doing that before you was born."

"Where was I born?"

"Better get the milking pails."

"It's early. Where, Pa?"

"Right in the house there." The old man motioned toward it. The early darkness of winter was coming down fast.

"Was that when my mother died?"

"It was. Your sister took care of you till I got home. It was a terrible storm and I couldn't get Doc Blake to come. He was drunk. That's why I'll whip you if you ever take to liquor. Now get the buckets."

"Pa, what's the matter with Liz?"

His father looked at him. Even in the half-darkness he could see the anger in the old man's eyes.

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody. I can see. Maybe you told me something when you swore at me."

"She's raised you like she was your mother. There ain't ever going to be a woman love you like she's done." The old man drove the pitchfork down on the cement floor, striking sparks. "You've been hanging around that Jennie Bergson . . ."

"No, Pa."

"Don't 'no pa' me. I seen you cutting out across the lake. Don't you go touching that girl, George. I've been watching her. She's just asking you to get her in trouble. That'd suit Neil Bergson fine. He's got too many girls to home now." He poked his finger into the boy's chest. "You don't touch a girl till you get one you want to marry. If you get feeling queer, you tell me about it, George. Maybe I can help you. I don't know. You can chop down trees." He made a wild gesture toward the woods. "We can read the holy Bible like I did. Now I'm going for the milking pails."

"Pa, what's all this got to do with Liz?"

"She's your sister, ain't she?"

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The old man's voice cracked on the words, and George let him go, not wanting to see him cry. Their conversation never did make sense to the boy, although he thought about it many times. He did not try to talk about it to his father again, but he tried to be kinder toward his sister. He did not comment further upon her cooking, and sometimes, making a sort of game of it, he let her wash his hair, and then in turn washed and braided hers.

"Don't you tell," he'd say. "I don't want them calling me sissy."

"It's a secret," Elizabeth agreed. "I like secrets." She would examine herself at the mirror over the kitchen sink, smiling vacantly into it.

Now and then, after staying overnight in town with a schoolmate because of a late basketball game or class play, George would say to his father, "Pa, I need $10 for the house."

"Do you?" the old man always said, but it was not a question. He led the way into the parlor where his rolltop desk stood and from the window ledge above it took the key and unlocked the desk. Within it he kept a strong box, also locked, and within that his cash and milk receipts, and over them a pearl-handled revolver.

"That's like giving a burglar a gun, keeping it there, Pa."

"Guns ought to be locked up," the old man said. He carried the revolver in his pocket once a month when he collected on the milk receipts and took the money into Masonville to the bank. Giving the boy the $10, he would say: "Something special?"

"I want to surprise Liz and you."

Thus George brought home now a table lamp, again a cover for the daybed, curtains, and sometimes a dress for his sister. He went alone and picked them out, and watched furtively while he did it that a schoolmate did not come upon him unawares.

His friends began to come to the house, some of them old enough to drive a car, and George had learned to play the mouth organ. In the summertime they swam in the lake below the Orbach farm, and afterwards roasted hot dogs on the beach. George played the tunes he knew, and all of them sang loudly, their voices carrying up to the house so that Elizabeth and her father felt compelled to go down to where they were. They sat quietly, father and daughter, in the shadows, and only when the fire blazed up, were they to be seen and waved at, but not heard.

But one night, above a rollicking song, Elizabeth raised her voice in a high sweet reverie of her own. It was like a bird's song, native to the night and the great high pine trees and the stars. There was no one there who could have said what happened to them, hearing it, but afterwards, the boys always inquired of George about his sister. And they did it reverently, as they might point out the moon's rising or a shooting star. They thought her very shy. Some nights she did not make a sound, as if there was no one song which seemed especially to tempt

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her. But when she sang, all of them felt happier and somehow wiser, and George thought that it was her way of saying things she never managed to get out in words.

Mike Orbach had never known such prosperous days. He often remarked that things were bound to bust wide open soon. "When a farmer makes a living," he would say, "the rest of the country must be making fortunes." He bought a new car and a good bull, and was at last able to breed his own cattle.

In the late spring the usual migratory strays started dropping off the freight train and applying for work by the day. They would come and go until harvest time. Mostly they were men of George's father's age, lean and grimed with the dust of many roads, and all of them with one habit in common: they were always in search of a place to spit, as though the chaff of a thousand threshings was in their throats. The only qualifications on which Orbach ever questioned a man was his sobriety. None of them admitted drinking, and most all of them drank, which he knew, but Orbach calculated his question to have a restraining influence. His only real measurement of a man was his day's work. The summer before George was to enter his third year of high school, Al Jackson came. He was at the breakfast table when George came in from chores one morning.

"This is George, my son," the old man said.

"My name's Jackson, Al Jackson. Glad to meet you, George." He half rose from the chair and extended his hand.

George was pleased at that, the handshake offered him as between men, and in itself a rare custom among the day workers. The handshake was firm but the hand soft, and George made up his mind then to keep his distance when this rookie started to wield a pitchfork.

"Al, here," his father said, "he's been in the army. He's going to take a day or so getting into shape. Man, how your back's going to ache."

There were plenty of men around already in good shape, George thought. There was not even the look of weather about Jackson. His face was newly sunburned, his nose peeling. Still, he was a big man, good-looking, and it might be fun to have someone around whose tongue wasn't wadded in his throat like a plug of tobacco.

"Can you milk?" George asked, for he did love to be relieved of that chore.

"Beg pardon?"

"Cows. Can you milk them?"

Jackson shook his head doubtfully. "I broke my arm a year back. It stiffened up on me. I don't think I'd do 'em justice."

This amused the old man, and Elizabeth, bringing the coffee pot, giggled. Jackson looked up at her and smiled. "That's the best oatmeal I've had since I left home."

Elizabeth blushed and had to set the pot on the table to get a better hold on it.

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George, trying to blend his cereal with the milk, said, "It's got lumps in it."

"Maybe it's got lumps," Jackson said, "but the stuff I've been having could've been chipped off a rock pile." He reached across the table for the coffee pot. "Here, let me pour that for you. Sit down, Miss."

"Her name's Elizabeth," the old man said.

"Really? That was my mother's name."

The right arm was limber enough with the coffee pot, George noticed.

But that summer George obtained his driver's license, and in the month between haymaking and threshing, and again between threshing and silo-filling, he spent his spare time in Masonville. His father paid him the wage of a hired hand on condition that he outfit himself for school that fall and buy his own books. It left him ample change for the juke box and the trivia he needed to bolster his attentions to Thelma Sorinson, a classmate of whom he had grown very fond.

Many times, with Thelma sitting beside him in the Ford, he remembered his father's outbreak when he had asked him about Elizabeth, his warning that George was not to touch a girl he didn't intend to marry. George reasoned that he might be willing to marry Thelma some day if she would have him. She was pretty and she could dance like a feather in a whirlwind. Thelma didn't care much what George reasoned, for he had grown tall and he shaved now once a week.

More and more at home he talked about her. His father nodded and asked such questions as what church she attended and what her father did for a living. Al, who had a bedroom in the attic, played a lot of checkers with the old man and a card game called "War" with Elizabeth, so that he was around often enough to take his turn in conversation.

"You ought to invite her out sometime so we can take a look at her, George," Al said one morning.

It was the first time since Al's arrival that George had felt one way or another about him. Now he measured how much a part of the family Al had become. He went to church with them Sundays, having bought a suit with his first pay; he took his bath in the family tub where other hands had always scrubbed down at the dairy pump; his shirts and underwear hung on the line with the household wash every Monday. More than any one thing, it suddenly irked George that Elizabeth should do his underwear.

"What do you mean, 'we'?"

Al shrugged and winked at the old man. "I like to see a pretty girl as much as the next guy."

"I'll say you do."

"That's enough, George," his father interrupted.

"Who's coming?" Elizabeth asked.

"A pretty girl like you," Al said soothingly.

Elizabeth clapped her hands.

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The old man was still talking through it. ". . . getting too big for your britches, driving off in a car and your pockets jingling . . ."

"For God's sake, Pa."

"You'll not swear in this house, boy."

George pushed back from the table, the anger choking him.

"He didn't mean no harm," Al said.

"I meant plenty!" George shouted.

Still Elizabeth clapped her hands. "When's she coming, George?"

"She's not coming ever, not here she's not!"

"Out! Outdoors with you." His father pointed, his finger trembling.

"I'll go when I'm ready," George said. "I live here, too."

But he went quickly and strode down the path to the chicken house. He caught up the scraper and basket and flung into the coop with such violence that the birds indoors fled screeching to the entry.

"His arm's not strong enough," George screamed after them, "to clean out a chicken coop, but he can bounce his backside on a tractor seat all day!"

It was milking time before George saw his father, for he did not go into the house at noon, tearing a few ears of corn from the stalks and eating them raw in the field.

"What have you got against him, George?" the old man asked when they met at chores.

"I don't know, Pa. All of a sudden it just seemed to me there was something bad about him. Maybe the way he looks at Liz."

"And maybe the way you're jealous, son?"

George did not look up. He had been afraid all afternoon that that was it. "Maybe," he admitted.

The old man weighed the words before he said them. "I'm hoping he's going to marry Elizabeth."

George could feel a sickness rising in him. "Oh no, Pa!"

"She isn't going to have you and me to look out for her always. Already you got a girl."

"And you?"

The old man squinted at him. "There's a place for me beside your mother. It's just looking at things straight. Nobody lives forever."

George thought about it. "But him, Pa. What's he see in Liz?"

He knew he had put it wrong the moment the words were out, for the anger flickered up in his father's eyes. But he spoke slowly and the anger eased away. "Can you tell me why you think a sunset's pretty and you wouldn't look up at the sun at noon? Can you tell me why?"

George shrugged.

"I couldn't tell you either. I think a shock of corn is beautiful. But there's some folks who'd tell you it reminded them of scarecrows. Now I think Elizabeth is beautiful."

"So do I, Pa."

"Do you, boy? Do you really? You better look down deep inside yourself. I ain't waiting for the answer, but you better look."

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George tried to look while he went about the chores, but he knew he was missing the heart of the matter. Still, he searched his memory for moments when he had loved his sister best. He dwelt especially on her singing near the campfire, and since he had not brought about such occasions this summer, he thought he had struck upon his father's meaning. It was true, he had neglected the most beautiful thing about her.

Going into the house at suppertime, he decided that an apology was due Al for the morning's incident. He tried to summon the courage for it. But Al greeted him heartily as though he had been off on a vacation, and because he had decided Al deserved an apology he disliked and distrusted him for not expecting it.

Within the week George arranged a beach party. It was too late in the season for swimming, but the full moon rose early over the lake, and as they huddled near the fire, boys and girls, their song was like a serenade to its great gold face. They were a long time singing before Elizabeth joined her melody to theirs, and her voice came faint and tentative at first, like a bird's mimicry. George, his arm in Thelma's as they swayed to the music, felt a startled pressure from her, and glanced up to see her smile as she withdrew from him. She was not sharing her discovery with him. It was a quick and private ecstasy, and he realized this must happen to everyone. Catching beauty was a selfish thing. A person had to catch it alone before he could share it. Elizabeth had found the courage of her voice now; she sang out her wordless music as she had never done before. And George had never felt so lonely.

He got up and moved away from the fire. He watched in the shadows while another boy filled in his place. He saw that boy pull Thelma down backwards and kiss her quickly, as one couple and then another were doing.

He turned away and his eyes grew accustomed to far images lighted only by the moon. Elizabeth stopped her song abruptly, and George climbed up from the beach. He trod amid the debris cautiously and searched the shadows. His eyes found her and Al, except that they were almost one person, so close was their embrace. He started toward them. Soundlessly, his father caught him from behind, whirled him around to face his own party and shoved him toward it. George went, but he sat apart and joined no more songs that night, blaming himself for having opened the full measure of his sister's beauty to her lover.

He stayed at home more after that and tried to pretend to a camaraderie with Al, asking him all sorts of questions about the army, his family, his schooling. Al parried the questions like an experienced boxer would an amateur, always keeping him at arm's length. He could tell him he'd served in Afghanistan, George realized, and he could not prove otherwise. On an inquiry about his family, Al said he was an orphan. George remembered

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the day he came: his saying that his mother's name was Elizabeth. Apparently George showed triumph in his face, because Al drawled: "When you don't have one of your own, you're liable to call any woman who's good to you 'mother.' Ain't that a fact, George?"

He retreated, bested in that as he was in all such encounters, and hated himself for it. He grew sullen, and now when Elizabeth sang often, even about the house as she had never done before, he snapped at her for it. She merely laughed and was still for a few moments. Then, her happiness bubbling up like spittle in a baby's mouth, she would have to let out the sound of it. He fled outdoors.

His father spent almost every evening poring over the Bible. Sometimes, coming on a phrase especially to his liking, he would read it aloud. "Ah," he would say as though he had discovered something for which he had been searching, "ah, listen to this." And he would read a passage, most often describing monumental sins true penitents had been forgiven.

From this, too, George fled.

His father came on him shivering in the pumphouse one night when it was time for him to start back to school. Cornered there, George took a screwdriver to the pump motor.

"There's nothing wrong with that," the old man said, watching him tinker in hurried clumsiness. "Put down your tools for a minute."

George obeyed him.

"A few years back," the old man started, "I was thinking serious of marrying Miss Darling . . ."

Miss Darling had been George's Sunday-school teacher.

". . . I figured we'd go away a while, her and me, and then come back to the farm. That way I thought you and Liz would be so glad to see me, you'd like her here, too . . ."

George felt something drop down inside him like a plunger.

"But things weren't as good as now, and it just got put off until it was too late. I'm going to send you away to school this year, son. I talked to Reverend Johns about it. He's recommending me a school after service tonight."

"Pa, I don't want to go."

"You always took to books. Now's your chance. No chores, no milking. You can go to the University then."

"No, Pa."

The old man looked at him. "Elizabeth and Al's getting married next week. I don't want you around then, George, the way you're acting."

George could not hold back the tears. "Pa, wait. Make them wait. Ask him where he came from. What does he want with us? Maybe he's got a wife already some place . . . He's 30, Pa . . ."

"He's being baptized tonight," the old man interrupted. "The Lord is cleansing him whatever sins he's done. I'm satisfied in that. He's seen salvation."

"He's seen a farm and a sucker!" George shouted.

The old man struck him hard across

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the face, the force of the blow knocking the boy backwards. The fanbelt broke his fall, but before he got to his feet the old man was at the door. He turned and looked back at his son, his eyes streaming. "All we seem to do any more is hurt each other."

When he was gone, the stench of sulphur from the well added to George's nausea. He went outdoors and retched. He was sitting on the stone hedge when he heard the car drive out. He watched for the taillight to appear on the highway, and seeing it, went into the house.

He could hear the clock tick in the stillness, and the water dripping at the sink. There was no other sound and he went up the steps to Al's room. He searched every drawer, finding nothing but clothes; not a letter, not a paper nor a picture, not even an army "dog tag." He almost tore the bed apart, and that search, too, was futile.

"Satisfied, kid?"

The boy whirled around. Al had climbed the stairs without a sound.

"You're supposed to be in church," George blurted out.

"And you're past due for hell," Al said, drawling the words as though there were no threat in them. "What did you find against me, George?"

Everything, George thought, but he could name nothing. He stood, stiff-tongued and awkward in every limb, while Al sauntered to the window and looked out. "I work hard, I go to church regular, and I'm going to marry your sister. I don't know another guy who'd do that."

George clenched his fists and managed but one step forward. Al spun around, holding in his hand the pearl-handled revolver.

"That's Pa's gun," George said.

"Pa's gun and Pa's bullets. You're a fool, kid. We could've got along fine, the four of us."

George was near to tears, fear and hatred torturing him. "Liz," he cried. "You don't love her. I know it. I can't prove it, but I know it."

"So what? Just so what? I never saw the beat of you and your old man for playing God almighty."

Al moved a step toward him, the gun real and steady in his hand.

The fear grew thick in George's throat. "What are you going to do?" he managed.

"You've been on your way to suicide a long time. I'm going to help you."

"Oh no," George moaned.

"Oh yes. Think about it, kid, the way you've been carrying on. Can't you just hear the old man saying, 'I should've put the gun away. I never should've left it where he could get at it.' "

Oh God, George thought, please God, help me. "Pa!" he called out, with the only responding sound the twitter of nesting birds. "Liz!"

"For just once we're going to be real close," Al mocked, coming on.

And at that instant, from the oak tree just outside the window, a bird sounded one last high burst of song.

Al started at the sound and jerked his head. George scarcely knew the

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impulse, but he leaped at the farmhand, striking the gun from his hand and following it to the floor. Even from there he started firing, the first shots wild, but one finding Al as he plunged toward him. The boy emptied the gun into the fallen body. Then he flung the revolver from him and groped his way through the smoke. Downstairs, he called the county sheriff's office and waited, his mind as empty as the gun.

The sheriff came a few minutes before his father and sister, and he told what he had done while a deputy intercepted the family outdoors. He repeated the circumstances, and took the sheriff to his father's desk to show him where the gun was kept. It had been taken out in haste the moment of his father's departure, George realized, for the rolltop was up and the strong box gaping. The sheriff shook his head, studying the boy, and George thought vaguely that the truth was not so apparent to the sheriff as it was to him.

Then the sheriff went upstairs, and George heard a car drive out. Presently another, or the same car, drove in again. His father must have taken Elizabeth somewhere. To the Bergsons', he thought. The old man came in. He didn't look at George where he was sitting on the daybed in the parlor. He went to his desk and stared at it without touching anything. He, too, was thinking George had taken the gun and gone upstairs to find Al, the boy reasoned.

The sheriff came down. "Sorry, Orbach," he said to George's father.

The old man looked at him.

The sheriff rubbed his neck. "He was marrying your daughter, was he?"

Orbach nodded, his face a dumb mask of pain.

"You got to believe me," George said then. He knew he was whining, but he couldn't help it. "He'd of killed me. I didn't take the gun, *he* did."

"I believe you, boy," the sheriff said. "Maybe this is all for the best. I just got an alarm on that guy at the office. Murder, while committing robery. I think he was holing in here."

The old man raised his head and cried out: "It is not all for the best!"

George forced himself to his feet, a terrible realization striking through his sick relief. "Pa! Did you know about him? Did you know that?"

His father lifted his eyes and his voice to the ceiling: "There's things we are not meant to know. God's mercy should not be thwarted by the vengeance of men. Vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord."

George stumbled from the room and then outdoors.

"Let him go," he heard the sheriff call. "He'll come back in soon."

But George did not go back. They may not understand him in the army, not knowing all these things. But his buddies are agreed on one thing: he makes a good soldier; and most of them think of George as "a born killer" — that's how little they understand . . .

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Gervase Fen and Inspector Humbleby in a delightful bit of 'tec tomfoolery

MERRY-GO-ROUND

by EDMUND CRISPIN

"NO," SAID DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR Humbleby. "No, it doesn't really do to play jokes on the police. You're liable to get yourself into serious trouble, for one thing. And for another, it's essentially unfair. . . . However, there has been just one instance, quite recently, of the thing's being brought off with impunity and, on the whole, justification." He chuckled suddenly. "I don't think anything's given us so much simple pleasure at the Yard since Chief Inspector Noddy tripped over his sword and fell headlong at the Investiture last year. . . . Tell me, did you ever come across a D.I. called Snodgrass?"

Gervase Fen said that he was sorry, he had not.

"I thought you might have, for the reason that Snodgrass is our expert on literary forgeries. . . . However. The thing about him is that although he's undoubtedly a very good man at his job, he's far from being an amiable character. Indeed, not to put too fine a point on it, Snodgrass is dour and suspicious to a quite offensive degree. So that when he came to deal with Brixham —"

"Brixham the newspaper baron?"

"Yes. Though it was Brixham the book collector whom Snodgrass offended. Brixham specializes in the Augustan period, you know — Pope and Addison and all that lot. That's relevant to what follows, in the sense that Brixham would obviously know a great deal about the pitfalls of literary forgery and would be in a position, with his money and printing presses and laboratories and so forth, to turn out a very creditable forgery himself. Of course, he must have had accomplices — technicians of various sorts. But Snodgrass never succeeded in getting a line on them, and it's evident that Brixham secured their secrecy by letting them into the joke.

"Well, now, the origin of it all was five years ago, when trouble arose over a first edition which Brixham had sold to a fellow collector, and which was suspected to be a forgery.

"Snodgrass investigated. And in the course of his investigations he was quite needlessly uncivil to Brixham (who turned out in the end to be completely innocent) — uncivil enough to have justified a strong complaint by Brixham to the A.C., if Brixham had chosen to make it. He didn't choose, however. He had other ideas.

"And just six months ago, after a long interval of patient preparation, those ideas came to fruition.

"What happened was that an old

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boy named Withers (who I think must have been a party to the plot) came to the Yard asserting that a letter recently sold to him by Brixham was a fake. The sum involved was only a pound or two. But if the letter was a fake, and Brixham knew it, then unquestionably a fraud had been committed. And accordingly Snodgrass started to inquire into the matter with a fervor worthy, as they say, of a better cause.

"The letter was dated August 9, 1716, and purported to be written by one Thomas Groate. You've heard, of course, of the publisher Edmund Curll?"

Fen nodded. "The man of whom Arbuthnot said that his biographies had added a new terror to death."

"Just so. Well, this Groate was apparently a clerk of Curll's. Nothing is known of him except that he was once alive and kicking. And no authenticated specimens of his handwriting remain. His letter — the one Brixham sold to Withers — consisted of petty gossip about the publishing world of his time. And its only real interest lay in a scabrous and, I should think, patently untrue anecdote about the poet, Alexander Pope.

"Now, it'd be wearisome if I were to detail all the tests Snodgrass applied to this document. As you know, there are a good many these days — constitution, size, cutting, creasing, and watermark of the paper; constitution of the ink, and the chemical changes brought about in it by aging; whether the writing overlays or underlays stains and mould-marks; style of calligraphy, spellings, accuracy of topical references; provenance; and so on and so forth. What with ultra-violet and spectroscopy, the ordinary forger doesn't have much chance.

"But Brixham wasn't an ordinary forger. And it was only when Snodgrass came to consider the pen with which the letter had been written that he at last struck oil. For the letter had been written with a steel pen. And so far as is known, the first steel pens weren't produced till about 1780 — more than sixty years after Groate's letter was supposed to have been written.

"Snodgrass ought to have paused at this point, and considered. Of all the mistakes which Brixham might have made in faking such a letter, this was one of the least likely. And if Snodgrass hadn't been so furiously intent on convicting Brixham, he must have realized that the mistake was a deliberate one.

"He didn't realize, however. Triumphantly he confronted Brixham with the proof of his fraud. And what should Brixham do, after hearing him out, but suddenly 'remember' that he had in his possession an advertising handbill of the period, in which, among other things, the advertiser (one Wotton) called the public's attention to his new steel pens, never before made, and of sovereign advantage. . . .

"Baffled, Snodgrass returned to the Yard with the handbill.

"Once again the machinery was

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put into operation. And once again every test failed except one.

"This time it was a matter of the advertiser's address. The paper of the handbill was watermarked 1715, and the address was given as Bear Hole Passage, Fleet Street. But reference to a historical gazetteer revealed the fact that on the accession of the Tories to power, in 1714, Bear Hole Passage was renamed Walpole Lane. So if the advertiser didn't know his own address. . . .

"For the second time Snodgrass confronted Brixham with proof of his forgery. And for the second time Brixham 'happened' to have an answer.

"On this occasion it was a letter purporting to be written by the publisher Lintot, in which reference was made to the fact that the stationer Wotton, a convinced Whig, 'doth obstinately and childishly refuse to employ the new address' — or words to that effect. In short, Wotton would seem, judging from Lintot's letter, to have done much what Mr. Bevan would probably do if the Post Office insisted on renaming his house Winston Villa.

"I think that at this stage Snodgrass must have begun to suspect that he was being made a fool of. But by now he was too deeply involved to draw back. Again all possible tests were made. Again they all failed — except one. That one disclosed a radical oversight, certainly: the handwriting of the Lintot letter, shaky and uneven, did not correspond at all with the handwriting of letters known to have been written by Lintot. . . .

"But that's just what finished it."

"Finished it?" Gervase Fen was surprised. "It's a glorious trick as far as it goes, of course. And I've been wondering all along how it could be artistically rounded off. But how did the Lintot handwriting finish it?"

Humbleby laughed delightedly. "It finished it because one of the bits of gossip in the forgery that started the chain — the letter from the clerk Groate — was that the publisher Lintot had recently had a slight stroke, 'which hath altered his hand almost beyond recognizing.'

"So you see, Snodgrass couldn't prove the Groate letter a forgery until he'd proved the Wotton handbill a forgery. And he couldn't prove the Wotton handbill a forgery until he'd proved the Lintot letter a forgery. And he couldn't prove the Lintot letter a forgery until he'd proved the Groate letter a forgery. Full circle, back where he had started . . ."

Humbleby reached for his beer. "Withers's check which he'd paid for the Groate letter was returned to him by Brixham. Some doubt had arisen, said Brixham in a covering letter, regarding the document's authenticity. As to Snodgrass, he was granted extended sick leave and is now away on a cruise." Humbleby shook his head. "But we're afraid — or perhaps I should say we hope — he'll never be the same again."

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WINNER OF A THIRD PRIZE

The fascinating story of a man who traded his easy charm for the easy things of life . . . set against a Maine background of sunsets and sea gulls and wild roses, of lobster boats and a fishing village and a moonlit harbor — all the heart-breaking beauty and romance of nature concealing the heart-stopping ugliness and reality that lurk in the eternal conflict between love for a woman and friendship for a man . . .

I'LL WAKE YOU EARLY

by MARGARET PAGE HOOD

HE STANDS IN THE HALLWAY, hesitating between the two closed doors.

False dawn turns the eastern sky lime green, the rote of inrushing tide sounds in his ears. It's not too late to turn back, jump into bed, pull the blankets over his head. Tell them he'd overslept, the whole thing is off. It's really nothing — an early morning walk across the moors gathering blackberries, a picnic breakfast on the beach.

What keeps him from knocking at those two doors, rousing the sleepers? Last night as he lay awake, watching the black shadows of the firs move across his window, thinking of her, he'd made up his mind.

Now he tentatively touches the nearer door. He knows what lies behind it. The tumbled bed, Bruce always an uneasy sleeper, his touseled head of dusty brown hair, his long-fingered hands relaxed on the cover. He'd wakened Bruce enough times to know how he rouses, yawns and grins, his ugly face dark with stubble.

Beyond the other door she lies. He fingers the latch softly. In imagination he sees her, warm, relaxed, her dark hair streaming like black waters between the pale mounds of her breasts. Only two weeks ago he hadn't known she existed. He remembers the day she came . . .

It was the same afternoon he'd stood in the driveway saying goodbye to a plump and portly ancient frump, bending over her hand as she'd sat reared back regally in the island taxi, her pug dog snuffling on her knees.

"Farewell, dear lady," he'd made a feint at kissing the plump hand, "until next summer wafts you again to Drift Inn."

Old Matt on the front seat had sent a stream of tobacco juice at a bee bumbling in the wild roses, stepped on the starter. "Only three minutes to make the boat," he'd said and sent

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the taxi jouncing across the boulders of the inn's steep road.

He'd been conscious of the fine figure he'd made standing there, a tall, broad-shouldered man in the fisherman's red flannel shirt he wore to give a salty tang to his mine-host role at the small seaside inn. He'd waved his bronzed hand lazily, the sun catching sparks from his ruby and silver ring, until the car turned the corner.

"Thank God," he'd said to Lizzie, "that's the last of the old bitches. I couldn't stand another day of them. This has been a horrible season, nothing but fat women and skinny old maids. Heaven help me, but I seem to breed them — bees springing from the carcass of the lion. Rather a mangy lion, hey, Lizzie?" He'd smoothed his silvered blond thatch of hair, touched the blue flower tucked in his shirt pocket.

Lizzie, with her fuzz of white hair, pin-point black eyes, and starched apron had been housekeeper at the inn for more summers than he could remember, starting in the days of his grandmother, that dauntless New Englander, who'd parlayed widowhood and an old house of bubble-glass windows and wide floor boards into a profitable career.

"You ain't pulling no compliments out of me." Lizzie'd snipped off her words like a woman cutting buttonholes. "You've been lapping 'em up all summer."

"That's my sweet girl." He'd pinched her round cheek. "Only woman in the world I love. Women! — I'm sick of them."

"You know you couldn't live without 'em," she'd slapped at his hand. "Had 'em at your beck and call ever since the day your grannie took you after your ma died, you no bigger than a mewling kitten on a piller. Brought you up like a little prince, nothing too good for you."

"Maybe that's why I'm such a helpless creature now," he'd replied.

"Helpless like a fox!" she'd exclaimed. "You don't fool me none, Timothy Lane, no more'n you did your grannie. She told me how the women tumbled over themselves to get their likeness made when you went to New York to be a picture painter. Then come summer, they follow you here to the inn and pay big money."

"For the privilege of choice Maine scenery, salt air, and your incomparable cooking," he'd reminded her.

"Got them same things cheaper when your grannie was running the inn," she'd remarked, "but now they sit around watching you make little daubs of sunset and sea gulls and fight over the chance to buy 'em."

"You make me sound a despicable fellow," he'd yawned lazily, reaching over to pull her blue apron strings loose. "If the silly geese want to pay for a souvenir of their summer, who am I to close their little hot hands around their dollars? In fact, Lizzie, I think I'm a benefactor of womankind."

"Your grannie'd hate to hear you."

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"Poor grannie, it's just as well she didn't live to see my degradation," he'd grinned at Lizzie. "Instead of running madly about painting post office murals with big-busted Freedoms and Justice playing at blindman's-buff, I'm content to dabble at paltrier pretties and clink the tea cups with Lady Luck. Alas, poor Timothy, I knew him well, a fellow of infinite jest! But come, Lizzie, let's not waste energy on talk when we can enjoy the peace of a Penobscot sunset. Pluck your instrument from your pocket, oh, ancient Muse, and blow a blast at the setting sun."

"No wonder the islanders think you're crazy, Timothy — you talk so silly," she'd rebuked him, but she'd pulled a harmonica from her pocket, and sitting on the doorstep, she'd blown a tune, her wrinkled lips sliding up and down the battered nickel.

He remembers now the comfort of lying back, swinging his moccasined feet in time with her song. Before him had spread the splendor of the bay, its brilliant blue shot with silver. In the distance, Camden hills raised cloudy curves. Through the narrows, the lobster boats drew home, gray gulls circling overhead. The dark firs of Fox Island had caught the sunset clouds on pointed spires. Below the inn the meadows poured down to the sea, the lavender of fall asters foaming on their green crests. The summer season was over. Only a pair of tardy lovers lingered on the rocks, a barefoot child chased the retreating waves. The bell-buoy sounded a lonely note. In the wind-worn elms a flock of crows talked of autumn.

He'd soaked in the peaceful beauty as if it were a tepid bath. It was true, he was weary of women, more weary because he knew how he depended on them. The pattern of his life had been formed early, and was too firmly jelled now to change. He'd learned to trade charm and a mediocre talent for his saucer of cream, and only now and then thought with envy of the wild toms battling in the world's alleys. He'd never scratched the pretty hands that set out his cream saucers. A few tears. A pouted lip. A lightly dented heart. No, he'd never hurt his women too much. Perhaps because he'd never loved them. The thought had drifted idly through his mind — *a man kills what he loves.*

There was only one for whom he had a sincere attachment. Bruce had been an awkward young English instructor at the prep school where his grandmother's insistence had kept him for a few years. An ugly, earnest young man then, he'd grown yearly uglier, more earnest. The friendship that had sprung up between the two dissimilars, himself as a boy and this man Bruce, had deepened. It was a touchstone to which he returned for renewal of the vital core lying beneath the easy charm with which he faced the world. No murky undertones of David-and-Jonathan, nothing physical, only faintly sentimental.

At the close of each summer Bruce spent a brief holiday at the inn. He, Timothy, depended on those days to

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keep alive his faith in his own integrity. He'd never admitted to such extravagant phrasing. He'd always considered it an interlude of comforting honesty in a year of gay and zany nonsense. Bruce was hard, clean friendship in a world of sprightly opportunism. The old chap venerated women like some hard-bitten knight of a long-lost round table, but he had no truck with them. His companionship was a draught of bitter tonic, a glass of quinine water, after a surfeit of Alexander cocktails.

Today Bruce was coming.

He'd jumped up, overturning the lawn chair, its legs collapsing like a disjointed grasshopper. "You got his room ready," he'd shouted at Lizzie.

She'd wiped the harmonica on her sleeve, tucked it in her pocket. "Sure, it's ready, with your grannie's wedding-ring quilt for extra cover."

He'd always given Bruce the best room in the inn, with the wide view of the open sea rolling toward the misty outline of distant islands where at night the flash from Saddleback's revolving light pricked the sky.

The ungainly island boat had been pulling into the wharf when he'd hurried to the edge of the gangplank. He'd seen Bruce standing at the rail. Same ugly little man with narrow, stooped scholar's shoulders, thin neck too fragile for his magnificent head, his heavy hair rumpled by the wind, his warm brown eyes smiling behind flashing glasses. What, no pipe? The poor little guy must have been seasick crossing the bay. Bruce without his pipe clamped between his teeth was as unfinished as a man without a nose. Then he'd noticed Bruce's hand on a woman's elbow, steadying her down the gangplank.

From habit he'd run an appraising eye over her figure. Surprised, he'd looked again. Taller by a head than Bruce, nice curves giving a subtle distinction to her simple clothes. No hat, but a coronet of dark braids above a pale face. A plain face, almost ugly at first glance, oddly disturbing at the second. A cold fish, he'd concluded. The assured simplicity marked her as a probable visitor at one of the north shore homes of wealthy summer residents who looked down chill Boston noses at both the islanders and the inn's paying guests.

He'd been astonished when Bruce guided her across the wharf toward him, beaming fatuously as a man does when introducing his best friend to a beloved woman, foolishly confident of immediate rapprochement between the two. Elsa raised her eyes, giving him a sudden glimpse of their glowing depths. Strange eyes, purple-black, glistening. They'd reminded him of something. He'd struggled for the association. Blackberries! The heavy rich fruit, black-purple with ripeness, hanging secret beneath their leaves. As her eyes met his, they had quickly lost their warmth, became cool and slightly critical. They had measured him and turned aside.

He'd hurried them into Matt's taxi. Usually he and Bruce walked back from the wharf through the

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narrow dusty street of the fishing village with its high-backed Eighteenth Century buildings reflecting unpainted faces in the calm inner harbor. Across the stone bridge where once granite columns from the island's quarries had been loaded for the harbors of a growing world. Up the hill with the goldenrod and ferns catching at their legs, through the brief woods where firs and larches leaned to the brook. A pleasant walk in which they recaptured the joy of comradeship. But not that day.

Supper should have been a cozy meal. The island girls who waited on table during the season had been dismissed, so they had eaten *en famille* in the kitchen. The old-fashioned kerosene lamps filled the big room with yellow radiance, the red-and-white checked cloth was crisp with starch, the black iron stove showed bright coals through its open damper. Lizzie's haddock chowder was rich with flaky white meat, powdered with brown crumbles of fried pork.

"Nothing like Lizzie's cream-of-tartar biscuits," Bruce had exclaimed. Splitting one, he'd tucked in a generous slice of butter, handed it to Elsa, then spooned the rich red globules of wild strawberry preserve onto her plate.

He hovers like a damned mother robin, Timothy had thought, and suddenly he'd realized he didn't like this poised stranger sitting at his table, eating slowly, placidly, with an enormous appetite for one so delicately proportioned.

After she'd gone to her room for the night, Bruce had joined him on the lawn. They'd sat silent, the moonlit harbor at their feet. Bruce had looked once more like himself, the pipe clamped between his teeth.

"I suppose you're wondering how this happened?" he'd said finally. His story poured out. She taught music in a girl's school in a neighboring town. He'd given a course of lectures there last winter. Met her, fell in love. He hadn't dared hope — Lord, how could such a magnificent woman see anything in him! She'd agreed to this vacation trip. They'd been restricted in their hours together. The mores of a select girls' school had limited his courtship. She'd decided they must have this interlude to be sure of themselves. As if he needed two weeks or two hours to know she was the only woman for him!

"A trial run, so to speak," Timothy could hear his own voice, faintly deriding. "No offense, old man," he'd added. But their brief moment of intimacy had been finished. Silently they'd mounted the stairs, turned into their rooms. It had been a small satisfaction to know Lizzie had given the unwelcome guest Bruce's room, and he was bedding down in a dingy room with no view and a swaybacked bed devilishly uncomfortable.

. . . Now his thoughts are interrupted by a soft movement behind her closed door. She might be waking, stretching out supple white arms, rubbing those mysterious eyes, heavy

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and sated with sleep as yesterday they'd been sated with . . . He pushes the memory from him. Now all is quiet again except for a first tentative bird call from the moors. His hand falls from the latch. He is back to the morning Lizzie had stood at the kitchen stove, scrambling the breakfast eggs . . .

"I'm glad you've quit sulking at Bruce," she'd said. "About time you stopped acting like a spoiled child, mad because your pal's picked another playfellow."

"Poor devil," he'd answered, "he's got enough trouble on his hands. Such a damned fool!"

"First time I ever heard you speak slightly of Bruce. Always acted like he was a tin god, you did."

"The tin god's got big fat clay feet now. Lets that woman run him ragged. 'Oh, Bruce darling,' " he mimicked the cool, clear voice, " 'do run upstairs like a sweet and get my dark glasses'. . . . 'Oh, Bruce, you're quite wrong in that opinion' . . . 'My dear Bruce, stop that abominable humming, you have no more ear for a tune than a cow.' She orders him around, Lizzie, like a servant, contradicts him, pushes him into conversational corners. She'll drain him as dry of personality as —" he had fumbled for the right word.

"Dry as Uncle Ben's winter cider barrel come spring," Lizzie had amended.

"And then she'll kick in the empty barrel. God, Lizzie, how I dislike her."

She'd given him a sharp glance. "Could be," she'd said tartly, "it's because she ain't given you much notice. First woman I ever saw round here didn't fall over you. Kinda got under your skin, maybe?"

Of course she'd been wrong, but it had given him an idea. He'd been stiffly polite to Elsa, angry because she'd intruded into the anticipated companionship with Bruce. But now, by God, he'd turn on the charm! He'd show Bruce she was like any other woman, fickle, easily won by attention and flattery. He'd cure Bruce of his infatuation. Damned if he wouldn't.

He'd used more subtle approach than was his custom, she being a more agile adversary. She'd responded with delicate footwork. Happily Bruce had beamed at their gaiety. A few more days, he'd thought, and Bruce's grin would vanish. As a gesture he'd always found infallible, he'd offered to make a portrait study of her. She'd sat for him in the sprawling lawn chair, its green awning filtering the light, washing her with an unearthly tinge. He'd have enjoyed painting her as he saw her, a fey creature, her high forehead faintly luminous like a smooth green apple in the sun, saved from ugliness by the wealth of her dark braids, the brilliance of her eyes. But he'd flattered too many women. Automatically his brush turned her into the doll-creature he believed all women enjoyed imagining themselves. Suddenly she'd walked over to peer across his shoulder.

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"Well," he'd asked, annoyed by her silence.

"It's no good you know," she'd said, "amusing but fruitless, this charming play for me. I know you hate me, want to break up Bruce and me. But I'm marrying him."

He'd dropped his brush and turned to her. "Then you love him?"

Her eyes had deepened from purple to black. She'd thrust her right hand before his eyes. "Do you see this?" she'd demanded. He'd never noticed before, but the hand, strong, muscular — the hand of a musician — was bent at an odd angle.

"Since I was five I've worked at my music," she'd told him. "Worked? No, slaved! They told my parents I had extraordinary talent. I was to be a great concert pianist. And I was. I made my debut, I was praised by the critics, petted by the public. Then it happened. An automobile accident that killed my parents and left me with this. Oh, they tried to remedy the damage. I spent the money I had, all my parents left me, on surgeons, bone specialists. It was no good. Then with it all gone — the money, the promise of fame . . . and what was left for me? I had to eat. I took what was offered, a job teaching stupid girls silly tunes. I was caged in a monotonous, sterile existence. Then along came Bruce and offered me a way out. I'd be a fool to refuse it."

"But don't you realize Bruce is a teacher?" He'd taken that white hand and gently stroked the crooked wrist. "If you hate school life you'll find you've jumped from the fat into the fire."

"Do you think I see myself as a Goodbye-Mr.-Chips sort of wife? Give me six months with Bruce and I'll have him out of that school."

"You'll ruin the poor chap. That school's the foundation on which he's built his life. To him his work in the classroom is what your musical future once meant to you. He's not fitted for any other life."

"We won't starve if he doesn't teach a crowd of gangling adolescents."

"So you know?"

"Yes, I know he has a comfortable fortune of his own."

"But do you know it's tied up so that he can't touch even the interest? That it's accumulating so when he dies the whole thing goes to a scholarship foundation for his school?"

"Fortunes can be untied," she'd replied. "Wills can be changed. In fact," she'd shot him an amused glance, "it's already been changed. The very day he asked me to marry him — to give me instant protection. So you see, it's quite useless for you to try to stop our marriage. Although I must say I've found your gallantries very amusing."

"You haven't answered my first question," he'd insisted.

"Must I?" she'd countered. "My dear man, this shouldn't be so disconcerting a situation. The pattern is quite familiar to you. We're so much alike, we two, Timothy Lane. Those who give and those who take!

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How fascinating we takers find life." She'd lifted the unfinished picture from the easel, torn it neatly into many pieces.

"If you hadn't painted a silly flattery," she'd said a trifle wistfully, "I'd have kept it in memory of a charming man who hates me because he's so much like me."

After that he'd tried to keep away from her, but had grown daily more puzzled at the insistence with which she'd crept into his life. Hated her? Of course he hated her! She'd taken no pains to conceal that she was coldbloodedly marrying his friend without love, that she'd ruin him within six months, break up his life pattern, turn him into a mental and spiritual lackey. She'd taken perverse pleasure those next few days in rendering Bruce ever more ridiculous — a jumping-jack for her slightest whim, as if she flaunted her power before his face. Of course he hated her! He wished for the hour she'd leave the island.

But he found himself watching her, taking a strange satisfaction in the very plainness of that cool face; imagining the texture of her smooth hair between his fingers; dreaming of her. Not a frankly erotic sequence, but a series of baffling phantasies leaving him confused and uneasy. And as he'd sat with Bruce and her at table or idly lounged in the thin September sun, he'd more than once surprised her eyes upon him, those amazing blackberry eyes with the spark of warmth below their cool surface. She'd always quickly lowered her thick white lids, but not before he'd caught those slanting glances compounded of curiosity and a delicately insidious hunger.

Yet it might have ended differently if it hadn't been for yesterday afternoon.

. . . he moves uneasily before her door. The false dawn has paled, and now the east shows a definite glow. The chill of a fog far out to sea seeps through the open window, the white curtains stir with the morning breeze. Faint and faraway across the blue reaches of Indian Creek comes the crowing of a cock. Soon it will be too late. Lizzie will be waking, bustling into the kitchen, her fuzz of hair stiff in metal curlers. If he is to do it, now is the moment. His hand hovers at the door. He is caught back by the surge of emotion which had engulfed him yesterday afternoon . . .

She had asked for a dish of boiled periwinkles for supper — periwinkles which Maine folk considered nasty little creatures fit only for baiting a child's fish hook. But she'd spent a year in England, learned to enjoy the small salty bits of flesh curled tightly within their shells. Obediently, Bruce had gone hunting the seaweed-covered rocks. Then she'd turned to him, smiling. "No one has shown me the secret meadow," she'd complained. "Won't you take me there?"

The meadow had been his secret and Bruce's. Every year they'd rowed across the bay to Fox Island, sat for

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hours in the lost, golden meadow, smoking, talking, drinking the beer they'd cooled in stout brown bottles sunk in the icy sea. He'd hesitated to take her there. For a moment she'd touched his arm, coaxingly, given him the deep warmth of her eyes.

The bay had been pleasantly rough, like the blue bubbled glass of the inn's windows. She'd sat quietly in the boat's stern, quiet like a good child with hands folded in her lap. As he'd tied the boat's painter to the rotting timbers of the forsaken wharf, she'd scrambled up the rough stones of the granite foundation, had run ahead of him across the grass-grown walk. Once the island had been the home of a prosperous fishing industry, now it was deserted. Bayberry grew among the stones of the cellar holes, Indian paint brush pushed into the once prim gardens. He'd led her through the thick tangle of fir and larch. A strand of her hair caught on a branch. As he loosened it, the dark hairs curled about his fingers as if they had a secret life of their own. The woods had opened out, they'd stood alone in the lost meadow. Warm with sunlight, the autumn grasses heavy-bearded with seed, silent, deep as a golden pool. Sighing, she'd thrown herself down, let the golden waves close over her. She reached up two wild white hands, as a drowning woman might reach for safety, and pulled him down to her . . .

The shadows of flying gulls moving across their faces had roused them. She'd sat up, her hands busy with the tangle of her hair. Cool, composed, only her eyes changed, full now of a sleepy content. She'd paid no attention to his question, looking at him with the amusement that a woman shows to a charmingly persistent but stupid child. Finally she'd said, "Who will tell him? And tell him what, for heaven's sake?"

"This!" he'd exclaimed. "It has changed everything. Shall I tell him, or will you? That now you can't marry him. That now it's you and I, Elsa. That we belong to each other. God, how can you doubt it?"

"What an innocent my dear sophisticate is," she'd answered. "Nothing has changed. You don't really love me. You only yearned for the supposedly unattainable."

His protests had wearied her. She'd moved away, shaking the golden grass from her skirt.

"What can you give me, compared to Bruce," she'd asked brutally. She'd brushed his talent aside with a flick of her crooked white hand. Married, he'd lose the favor of his clack of women. He'd been a tame cat too long to compete in a wild cats' world. He could never give her the safety, the luxury she'd have with Bruce.

"Then why?" he'd demanded, "why this?"

She'd walked across the meadow, the perfume of crushed sweet fern dying under her footsteps. He'd overtaken her, held her fast. For a moment she'd clung, half-yielding, then pushed him aside.

"Curiosity," she said coldly. "The

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measure of man's friendship for man."

He could have killed her as they'd stood alone in the lost meadow. For this he'd betrayed his friend. His affection for Bruce washed over him, swelled the rising tide of hatred he felt for the woman. She'd betray Bruce again and again, not for love, but for a whim, a fancy. He hated her beyond measure.

And now he realized that Bruce must be saved.

. . . As he stands by her door, the morning growing ever clearer about him, he marvels at the man he'd been there in the meadow, filled with such a singleness of purpose. Even last night as he lay in bed planning what must be done, it had seemed simple, clear-cut. Then why must he hesitate now? Why must his mind be like a piece of watered silk? Turned one way, the clear blue of his love for Bruce gleamed simple and bright; turned another, and there shone, strong but dark, the deep red of his passion for Elsa. Hate or love? Why couldn't he decide?

The plan had evolved so easily. It had been started by Lizzie as they'd sat over their coffee last evening. Who would think the mention of blackberry shortcake could lead to murder? No, not murder. Not like a man pulling the trigger of a gun, seeing a body sag under the impact of a bullet. He could never do that! Not even poison slipped secretly into a glass. He couln't bear watching a face twist in pain, muscles knot in convulsions. No, this was merely making an opportunity . . .

His mind runs backward to last night: Lizzie saying that another visit done and she hadn't made Bruce his promised blackberry shortcake . . . Bruce asking if the berries are ripe . . . The plan springing into his mind . . . He hears himself speaking: Yes, the blackberries are thick along the moors . . . How jolly, we'll all get up early and go berrying, have a picnic breakfast on the beach at Indian cove . . . I'll wake you early, he'd promised, we'll all be on the moors by sunup . . .

. . . *I'll wake you early*, he thinks to himself. But not all of you. Only one. He knocks at a door . . .

He's waiting downstairs in the kitchen. He's made a pot of coffee. They sit drinking the hot, strong brew. The morning's wonderful as they walk out the door, just the two of them, leaving the others sleeping. The wet grass catches at their ankles as he talks. He stoops to pull a handful of bayberry leaves, crumple their fragrance between his fingers. He points out the ancient cemetery, the stones moss-grown, the carved letters obliterated by winter winds. Beneath his surface ease he feels his heart beating heavily. A field sparrow flutters up from under his feet. He senses the first wet fingers of the fog on his cheek. It's rolling in now, thick and white from the sea.

All the better.

Here is the place.

He doesn't hesitate.

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"Over there," he says, "I saw berries growing thickest when I walked on the moors yesterday morning. Thousands of them, hanging ripe and rich beneath their leaves. We'll separate. You pick that patch clean. I'll turn here and go down by the creek to a likely spot I know. That way we'll both fill our pails quicker. I'll meet you here in about half an hour."

He turns, walks away without a backward look, the fog rolling in between them. Now he wants to run crashing through the bushes, the thorny canes tearing at his legs. But he holds himself back. He must walk slowly, stoop to pick the dark fruit. It may not happen, he tells himself. It may not happen. Slowly, carefully he lifts the leaves, the purple berries staining his fingers. But always he moves slowly away, glad of the shrouding fog. Until at last he stops at the edge of the creek. His legs buckle under him. He lies face down in the sand. The sound of the tide, the thudding of his heart, mingle in his ears. The male scent of rotting seaweed is in his nostrils. Through the curtain of the fog the waves creep in, cream against the sand, but he doesn't see them. He knows what must be happening on the other side of the fog curtain. He sees it. The eager figure leaning forward to gather the choicest berries. Moving closer, ever closer to where the tall canes grow rankest, where they bend over and intertwine until they hide the ground, hide the rotting boards of the old well. He doubts if anyone on the island remembers that old well. Sunk 200 years ago when the first settler built his cabin on the moors. A deep well lined with smooth granite blocks, coated with the dark slime of years, the water black and still.

The figure takes another step forward. The boards give way. A cry! He shuts his ears against a cry. It comes piercing and shrill. The cry of a sea gull riding ghostlike on the fog. It galvanizes him. He cannot control himself. He must run, stumbling through the swirling gray curtain. Perhaps it's not too late.

He finds the tall canes torn and broken. The splintered boards. He throws himself full-length on the ground, peers into the black pit of quiet water. He tears off his sweater, lowers it like a rope. But there is nothing he can do. He thinks he sees the pale glimmer of a face floating in the darkness. Automatically he snatches up his pail of blackberries. It bumps against his arm like a live thing as he runs back across the moors, crying for help.

Now it is all over. The limp dripping body is gone. The doors of the island hearse clanged shut, its wheels jolting against the stones of the driveway. The coast guard boat will bring the sheriff from the mainland later. It's a mere formality. Accidental death. They sit silent and uncomfortable in the parlor, the fog pressing against the windows, shutting them in together. Lizzie breaks the silence. She stands in the doorway.

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"You must eat," she says, "eating's for the living. Nothing brings back the dead."

As if they are children she takes them by the arm, leads them into the kitchen. The stove glows red, the odor of boiling coffee is as potent as a nip of whiskey. The toast is hot and buttery, the bacon a curl of brown goodness. His mouth is filled with sawdust.

Lizzie places a dish on the table, walks away toward the parlor. It is a deep glass dish, overflowing with blackberries, crusted with the lavender of melting sugar, covered with the wrinkled skin of heavy cream. He sees again the overturned pail at the edge of the well, the crushed berries bleeding. He chokes and half rises from the table. A hand reaches out, dips the spoon deep into the dish.

He sees her eating, slowly, daintily, a faint purple staining her lips, her eyes filled with calm, sensuous satisfaction.

With a cry he sends the dish crashing to the floor.

Now he knows.

The purple blood of the blackberries spreads at his feet. Widens. Blots out his world.

He hears her low laugh, reads the triumph in her eyes.

Her pointed tongue licks the last drop of sugary sweetness from the spoon. So she licks up one man's fortune. So she licks up another man's soul.

Now he knows.

At dawn that morning — and he would know it for the rest of his days — he had knocked on the wrong door.

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(see page 48 for the author's list of errors and explanations)

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Black Mask *is now part of* EQMM

Here is another original story for our Black Mask department — again typifying the highest qualities of the humanistic tradition founded by Hammett and fostered by Chandler. You will probably remember the author, William Krasner, for his two fine mystery novels, WALK THE DARK STREETS *and* THE GAMBLER, *both published by Harper and the former telecast no less than three times.*

Mr. Krasner is in his middle thirties, not married, not especially employed, though (to quote the author himself) he occasionally writes. He recalls that he went to the same high school in St. Louis that Tennessee Williams attended, and at the same time; and later he spent a year in the same local university (Washington) that other famous writers went to before him — Fannie Hurst, Josephine Johnson, and poet T. S. Eliot. Like so many others who finally drifted into writing, Mr. Krasner has had a checkered career of vocation and avocation: newsboy, helper on a produce truck, hospital orderly, warehouse laborer, shoe salesman, post office clerk, and other flounderings. During World War II he was an Air Force weatherman in various capacities and installations, including Kwajalein and Hawaii. He wrote WALK THE DARK STREETS *while attending Columbia University on the GI Bill of Rights and while taking a writing course under Caroline Gordon from whom, he admits, he learned a great deal.*

His philosophy of writing? He believes strongly and deeply in character and emotional motivation as the most important elements in fiction; plot, of course, is also important, but subordinate. You will find that Mr. Krasner practises what he preaches in his first short story for EQMM. Here is the realistic tale of two weary, overworked cops. The sense of enormous fatigue runs like a frayed thread through the design of the story. It is a tale of the seamy side of life — the side that Black Mask was never afraid, even at the risk of glorification, to expose in all its grimy, sordid details — the slums, the backwashes, the dark alleys, the garbage-strewn tenements, the streets full of underprivileged children . . . Mr. Krasner's story is at once tough and compassionate, hard and understanding . . .

You will be interested to learn that the author plans to include "All in the Day's Work" as a chapter in his third novel, tentatively called NORTH OF WELFARE, *to be published some time next year.*

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ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK

by WILLIAM KRASNER

"THREE THIRTY-FIVE EAST," DETECTIVE-SERGEANT George Hall said: "This looks like it."

"Yeah," Irey answered.

"Nice place."

"They all are," Sergeant Irey said. He rubbed his eyes. They were tired, full of the grit of fatigue, which was also in his skin and in the lines of his face. His dark suit — the long-suffering cloth of the plainclothes detective — sagged at the pockets, the elbows, the knees. He was taller and leaner than Hall; he did not dress as well and his beard was heavier; so that when, like now, they had been working for long stretches without rest, he usually looked the seedier of the two. Hall, who was heavy-set and cherubic, at his worst resembled an insurance salesman who had walked too long in the sun on a hot day. But Irey's day-old stubble was black and there was a bitter taste in his mouth. He tried to spit it out on the sidewalk.

Behind them the two white-and-green prowl cars were angled to the curb, and uniformed police were getting out. Though it was eleven P.M. and they had only just pulled up, there was already a solid mass of children eddying about — Puerto Rican, Negro, Italian, Irish, Jewish, and a sprinkling of nearly everything else. One patrolman was trying to disperse them, but they refused to leave.

Sergeant Irey glanced up at the building. It was like every other tenement on the block, on most blocks in South Harlem. There was garbage in the gutter and in the corrugated cans piled high next to the steps, and some of the slops had been scattered on the sidewalk.

Hall nodded toward the door. "Really think he's up there?"

"No. Even he'd have better sense. But we got to find out."

The press of children flowed over and clogged their path. Dogs ran and barked on the outside of the group. On a fire-escape landing over their heads on the building to the left a three-year-old boy, wearing nothing but an undershirt, stood and stared owlishly down at them. The two detectives started to walk and the uniformed police tried to clear the way. "All right, you kids, go on, beat it home! Beat it home, now!"

"We could put up a neon sign telling him not to come home now because we're here," Hall said. "Except that we don't need it."

Irey pulled his collar open. He sucked his salty lips. To a uniformed sergeant behind them he said, "This place has a back fire-escape — get a couple of men under it. Our apartment's third floor back." To Hall he said, "Let's go."

They went up a few stone steps and

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through a door with a broken pane. The inside was typical: worn cement floor, dim lights, streaked, colorless walls, and the constant flushing of the common toilet. Already the inhabitants had been alerted and they jammed the hall, in the clothing, or lack of it, that they wore on hot nights. "Tell them all to get back to their rooms," Irey said to the patrolmen that followed, and the two went ahead, trotting up the littered staircase.

The apartment they wanted was at the end of a short, stubby hall off the stair landing. Its door met, at a sharp angle, the door that led to the next apartment, so that there was little space to stand before it, and it could not be flanked. Standing to the side, the wall behind him, Irey reached out and knocked loudly. After a few seconds he knocked a second time.

"Who is it?" a young woman's voice asked. Then, more hesitantly, "Rocky? . . . That you? . . . What are you knocking for?"

"Police officers," Irey said. "Open up, Miss."

Now there was no sound — not even steps to the door. Sergeant Irey loosened the gun in his shoulder holster. He dropped his hand to the door handle, and turned it tentatively. It was not locked. "Cover me," he said to Hall. He pushed the handle hard and suddenly, and stepped back against the opposite doorway, his hand under his coat.

There was just a girl on the other side — a very young, very dark girl, holding her raised hand to her breast. She was standing next to a green enamel-topped kitchen table on which there were cards spread for solitaire, and a single cup. There was no one else there.

Irey glanced behind the door, then, cautiously, stepped inside. There he looked around. The room, a combination kitchen and living room, was empty except for the two of them. It opened, through small, warped double-doors, into a bedroom. "Cover me," he called out to Hall again, and went over and, his back against the jamb, looked into the bedroom from the side. Finally he came back and stood before the girl.

Her hand was still against her large, firm bosom. It was a hot night — she wore a plain, light house dress and, apparently, nothing underneath.

"All right," he said, "where is he?" He glanced at her left hand — she wore no ring. "When's your boy friend coming back?"

She was almost too young. Yet neither her lips nor her clear black eyes — after the first involuntary movements — moved or trembled.

"Come on, come on!" he said impatiently. "Your boy friend Rocco — Rocky you called him when we knocked on the door. Where's he at now? When d'you expect him?"

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on. Don't make us take you down too. . . . Look, sugar, we've got him anyhow. Let's make it easier for everybody."

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Her head lowered a little. Her eyes swept, knee-high, over the floor. "I don't know. . . . He doesn't come around here much any more."

"No," Irey said. "Not much." He brought his hand reflectively across his mouth, glanced at Sergeant Hall still in the main doorway, and motioned him toward the bedroom. "Go sit against the wall in there, will you, George, while I talk to the girl friend here? One of us ought to be out of sight no matter which way he comes in."

"Okay." Now that the first tension was over Hall yawned and rubbed his red, puffy eyes. "You don't think he'll really try to come back, do you?"

"No — mostly I just want to talk to her. But let's not take any chances, huh?"

"Right," Hall said. "Glad to get the weight off my feet." He yawned loudly again, and went into the bedroom.

Irey closed the door to the hall. He brought a chair around to face it, in such a way that the girl was also in his area of vision, and then he sat down and leaned back, leaving his coat open. "Go on," he said to her, "sit down." She would not, for a moment. "Go on, go on, sit down."

Finally she did, on the edge of the chair, her back rigid. His first impression, he decided, was right — she wasn't too clever. She could not hide her feelings, she could not even lie convincingly. Her wide black eyes stayed on the door as though she expected it to speak to her. Her dress was low-cut, and it had twisted a little to the side when she had sat; but she was too occupied, apparently, to be conscious of her appearance, of the picture she made. Some of her color had come back, and it tinted her throat and her face. When they were young they were all highly colored, girls like that, in this neighborhood.

He said, "You really think your boy friend is going to walk back in here, back to you, don't you?"

Her eyes flashed to him, then back to the door. Her lips started to move, then closed.

He smiled a little grimly, creases appearing in his black-stubbled cheeks. "You think he'll try, but you'd die before you told me, wouldn't you?"

"He never did anything wrong."

"Course not. . . . And he tells you everything, too, doesn't he? Come on, sugar, now tell us where he is."

"You dirty cops! You stinking, dirty —"

"All right, all right!" He brought his hand down. "For Pete's sake, your boy friend isn't even smart! He's a patsy. A lot of you people have the name Patsy, don't you? Well, that's what he should be called too. He isn't even smart enough to steal a car for a stick-up — he has to use his own, so we can trace it through the license number. Then, getting away, he blows his lid like a punk and runs down a woman pedestrian — she's in the hospital now and she'll probably die. The other hoods made a sucker out of him. But that doesn't make

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him any prettier. Now come on, just tell us where he is and we'll all go home and leave you alone."

The color drained back from her face and for a long moment she was silent. Then she said bitterly, "You stinking cops. Always have to find somebody to blame things on, don't you?"

She was like a child repeating a lesson — a lesson she had learned well, from the classroom outside. "So," he said, "it's like that." He tapped his fingernail on the hard enamel of the table — a series of short clicks. "What's your name, sugar?"

"Marie."

"Marie what?"

"Cardone."

"Cardone." So she was at least half Italian. He had, of course, known that — the curling heavy black hair, the eyes, the skin. These were the years of her flowering. They grew that way in these neighborhoods, girls like this, like eager plants in well-fertilized soil — full and lush. And then, as quickly, they became swollen and old. It was the perfection that impressed him most — the smooth clean curve of lip, the exact teeth, the absence of a single line or spot of dullness in the face or the eyes. The proud curve of the neck, above the breasts. "How old are you?" he asked. "Seventeen? Eighteen?"

She shook her head.

"All right. Nineteen."

Suddenly her eyes flashed again, and her lip lifted, showing the sharp teeth. "You stinking cops! Just have to have somebody to stick things on, don't you? He's working, that's where he is! Go on, why don't you check where he's working?"

He tapped his fingernail again slowly on the enamel. "Got news for you, sugar. He didn't show up for work tonight. And people have already identified him from his photograph. . . . Like I said, he's not even smart."

Now she remained silent. His hand on the table tightened. "What is it with you dames?" he said. "What is it? You'd go to bat — you'd go to hell — for some cheap crook who isn't worth the powder to kill him. And you'd sell out everything and everyone for him."

Then he too sat quiet. After a moment, however, he turned his face angrily toward the bedroom, from which the faint sound of sibilant breathing could be heard. "George!" he shouted. "George, damn it!"

The sound stopped. Then there was the muted noise of a throat being cleared. "Okay, okay," George Hall's voice said fuzzily. "Coming."

He came through the door blinking, his clothes a little rumpled. He winced at the light and shook his head. "Rough," he said.

"Damn it, George, I ought to see you pull Sunday duty for a year for this!"

"Yeah," Hall said. "Yeah."

He too sat down at the table. His hair stuck up in back like a doll's, and there were pink and white blotches on his smooth cheeks. He looked about

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him with a kind of dull wonder. "Boy, am I bushed." He rubbed his face, making it even more pink. "Sorry."

"Now that you've had a rest you think you might be willing to do a little work?"

Hall worked his lips. There was a light blond stubble on his chin, but it was not as noticeable as the black brush on Irey's. "Coffee'd sure go good now," he said. He smiled his sleepy cherubic smile at the girl. The situation did not seem to bother him at all. "I bet here's a little lady who'd be glad to make coffee for a couple of hard-working cops about to go out into the cold again. Wouldn't you?"

The girl did not answer. Irey frowned, but Hall continued to smile guilelessly at her. "Get your coffee outside," Irey said. "Go ahead. You can bring some back for me, too."

"Ah, well," Hall said, "that's life." He sighed and got up. "What d'you mean, bring some back for you? You're not going to keep hanging around here, are you? You don't really think that guy's going to come back?"

The girl's eyes turned to them. Irey watched her for several seconds. "I think it might be worth a chance," he said finally. He turned to Hall. "But not while we're holding a free circus outside! Tell those guys to beat it — all except the two by the fire-escape in the back. Tell them not to go far — they can keep cruising around if they can make it look natural — but for Pete's sake get them away from out in front! And *you* walk around till you're awake, because you're going to stay out there too. Find a good spot you can watch from."

Hall sighed again. "Yessir, boss." He glanced from Irey to the girl and back. He saluted. "Right," he said, and left.

Irey turned back. The girl had stiffened once more — tightened like a tuned instrument — and sat rigid, the liquid eyes again fastened on the door. He listened too, but there was only Hall's retreating steps. After a moment he relaxed and concentrated on her, but the girl did not change.

From the airshaft two cats suddenly screamed at each other and spat, like a scattering of electric sparks — which stopped as abruptly as though someone had pulled a switch. It had always disturbed him — the great number of cats in South Harlem. In an area in which humans were so piled one on another that there was scarcely space to breathe, cats grew and multiplied. Garbage was thrown from the windows and strewn in the gutters and on this they — in careful amity with the rats — lived and fed. They hid in cellar passageways and airshafts. They feared no dogs. Often, very late, he saw mother cats cautiously leading their stiff-tailed kittens out to the gutters. The young that grew wild allowed no one to come close. They sprang away, small bright eyes fixed on whatever approached. They would not be petted; almost as soon as their eyes were open they

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could snarl and spit, and their little claws were painful.

He said, "Why don't you give it up, kid?"

She did not even look at him.

He said, "Look, sugar, at the best there's nothing in it for you. Don't you see that? Even if he got away this time, it wouldn't be long before we picked him up on something else. For you it would just mean living in one dirty hole after another — until he threw you out. And he'd probably do that when you were pregnant or sick — we see plenty like you come in. Why, hell, he won't even marry you now!"

Her lips parted slightly — the clean line of red against the white teeth — and she apparently began to breathe a little more deeply because the cloth across her bosom tightened and then shrank. But still she faced the door.

He said again in a low voice, "What is it with you women anyway? What is it? What does he do for you?"

No answer. He fished a cigarette from his pocket with two fingers and put it unsteadily in his mouth, his eyes remaining on her. "What do you think it is? Love? Like in the movies?" The limp match folded and broke in his fingers; he dropped it to the floor. He rubbed the back of his head. "Damn, I sure need some sleep," he said, and got up and began to pace.

Her eyes, watching the door, grew wider, and cords appeared in her neck. He turned and listened too, and after a moment he heard them — male footsteps coming up the flight before their landing; but long before he recognized them as those of his own partner, Hall, her face had smoothed and become a mask again.

Hall knocked, opened the door, and came in carrying gingerly a white cardboard cylinder from the top of which a thin wisp of steam escaped. Irey scowled; Hall's coat was unbuttoned and one of the straps from the shoulder holster was visible. Hall set the container down, shook his hot fingers, looked at the other two, said, "Yessir!" and once more was gone.

Irey sat down, opened the container, and drank a little. The coffee affected him like a drug, stimulating and brightening him momentarily, yet leaving the ragged edge of his fatigue intact. "Good," he said, "good." He held to the container, feeling the warmth in his fingers. "Go on," he said. "I want to know."

"Oh, my God!" Her voice was vibrant with loathing. "Aren't you cops even human? Don't you ever even have wives or sweethearts?"

"Sure," he said. "Sure, we have wives . . . sweethearts. But they know where we are nights. We don't make whores out of them. We don't drag them into stick-ups and killings." His fingers trembled on the warm, white cardboard. "Sure . . . sure we have wives. My divorce — from mine — just went through last week."

She stared at him. Her eyes narrowed, and once more the tips of the perfect teeth showed.

"No," he said, "I don't mind tell-

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ing about it. Nothing for me to be ashamed about. . . . Like I say — I don't understand you women." He took up the coffee and held it a moment. "I guess she liked other men too much." He paused. "No, it wasn't that — even that wasn't so important —" He stopped. It was more difficult than he had thought. He realized that if he hadn't been so tired he wouldn't have been talking like this.

"I'm glad," she said. "I'm glad!"

"Glad?"

"Glad! Happy!" He looked at her with surprise; her eyes and lips were pulled back into an expression of maliciousness so intense it was almost physical. "I hope you get another girl soon — so it can happen again!"

He pressed his lips together. "You're pretty silly. And what do you think is going to happen to you?" He touched his fingers to his cheek. They were hot from the cardboard. He had known they would be, but it was still a little shock to feel them against the normal temperatured flesh.

Her eyes remained triumphant. He reached under his coat and made sure again that the pistol was loose in its holster. "Well," he said, "this isn't getting us anywhere, is it? Why don't you help us out? There'd be less chance of him getting hurt if you did. And you wouldn't be messed up in his trouble."

She spat.

"All right then . . . I'm sorry. We'll just have to take care of him our way when he comes."

The cats screamed again, and one moaned for a long protracted moment afterward, like a child crying and pleading. They made the same sounds whether fighting or making love — if, with them, there was any difference.

She said, "You think he's afraid of *you*?"

He looked at her through red eyelids. "It's my job, kid."

"You!" Her color rose. Her eyes flashed proudly. "Why, if he came here — if you heard him running up those steps —"

He watched her soberly. "I'd run," he said. "I'd run before the knight on the white horse." He took some more of the coffee. It was becoming cool; a tan scum was forming on the top. "You're not very bright, kid. You know that, don't you?"

"You dirty . . . *cop!*"

"All right," he said tiredly. "What would he do? Tell me. . . . The place is surrounded with cops. What could he really do?"

It took a moment for the light to go out of her face. He watched it. She said, "He won't come. He won't come at all."

"No?"

"No . . . He's too smart for guys like you."

He barely smiled. He watched her. From time to time there were sounds of running feet on the staircase and her eyes flew to the door; but he just kept his on her.

Finally he glanced at his watch. Then he pushed aside the container

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because he didn't need it any more. He said, "It'll be soon, won't it?"

"What?"

"If he didn't tell you about this deal then he knows you'll expect him home from work. So he'll come back at the usual time . . . And that'll be very soon, won't it?"

"He's not coming! I told you that!"

"I know."

"He doesn't stay here every night!"

He nodded.

"Listen here!" She turned suddenly, and the hair frothed like black lather around her neck. "He's not coming, I told you! What right've you got around here anyway? You don't have a warrant! You don't have any right around here!"

He was quiet.

"What do you want? What do you want here anyway?"

"Nothing from you," he said.

She looked back at the door. But now what was in her eyes was terror. She was young, and not too clever; she could not hide her feelings very well. Her breasts pressed hard against the thin, restraining cloth. He reminded himself that she had not dressed that way deliberately, certainly not deliberately for him.

She said, "What do you want?"

He shook his head. "I don't want anything."

"Listen. It doesn't mean anything to you. What do you want? . . . What do you want! You want . . . me?"

He looked at her staring open eyes and parted lips. He studied the tremor in her throat, listened to her heavy breathing. . . . No, not for him . . . no woman in his life would ever do that for him. . . . Once or twice she jerked her eyes away — but they always went back to that door . . . His lips pressed, bloodless, against his teeth; watching her, he held his breath and after three or four seconds he could hear them too — very light footsteps. Without her he would never have noticed — or known that they were unique in any way. His eyes still on her, he got up and backed to the door. Through the panel the footsteps were clearer.

"I don't want anything from you," he said. "Except that you sit quiet."

The footsteps came on. At the landing they paused. A long pause. It was several seconds before he heard the first tap on the floor of the tiny hall.

Not for a second had he been foolish enough to trust her — his eyes had been on her all the time. He had known she would try something. But he had never dreamed she could be so fast — or scream so loudly. He could not even get his gun out. Her fingernails were in his cheek, reaching for his eyes. Her sharp heels gashed his shins. From her years of experience in that neighborhood she knew exactly what to do with her knees. While he tried to push her away, the two of them fell against the door, and it shivered and rang. Then she caught one of his wrists in her teeth, and bit.

Swearing savagely he yanked it

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from her mouth — leaving bloody streaks across the flesh — and brought the fist back hard. Had he had the gun in it then, as he had in a moment, she would have lost those teeth — those perfect teeth. As it was she fell backward and over the chair.

Then he had to fight the lock, and the sprung door, with one hand, holding the gun ready with the other. He had only one foot in the hall when he heard the shout, the scraping foot — and then the crack of the pistol.

The man was leaning on the wall of the stairway, at the first landing going down. He wore a white shirt, open at the throat, and his hair was as black as the girl's. There was a spreading red blot on the white shirt, in the hollow of the shoulder, under the collar bone. The arm from that shoulder hung as though it had no bones, and the pistol dangled from the tips of the fingers. Irey kicked the gun and it clattered and echoed down the steps without going off, and nicked a piece of dirty plaster out of the wall that stopped it. The man gave a little cry, and his limp hand quivered.

The girl had been screaming behind him, trying to get by, and now he let her.

George Hall started up the steps and picked up the pistol, his own still in his hand. He was fully awake now — and white. He did not, Irey remembered, like to use a gun. "Hell," he said, "I shouldn't have let him get so far ahead of me. I shouldn't have."

The girl's arm was around the man's back. Her disheveled hair fell against his white sleeve. There was blood in her mouth and she spat it out against the wall. Irey could see that her teeth remained blood-streaked.

"Easy!" the man said, "easy!" He muttered it over and over, like a prayer. His good hand scraped the wall, looking for support. But she took all his weight on her, and lowered him gently, swaying only a little, to the steps, then sat down, cradling his head. "Does it hurt much, honey?"

Downstairs, in the passageway under the house, there was a pounding of feet — probably the patrolmen from the back. A block away he could hear the siren starting. There was a gabble of excited voices, and doors slamming, and then moving heads appearing at the top and bottom of the staircase — but stopping on the landings. The spreading of the blood on the man's shirt had slowed.

"How does it look?" Hall asked.

"How do I know?" Irey said. "I'm not a doctor." He leaned over to gaze at the wound. And then at the faces of the couple on the steps. He said, "Doesn't look too bad. Doesn't look like you hit an artery. Stay here. I'll send the first aid up from the patrol car, and radio for an ambulance."

"God," Hall said.

"Don't feel sorry for him," Irey said. He went down the steps and out toward where the prowl cars would be pulling up.

(**Black Mask** *section continued on page 89*)

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A WINNER IN EQMM'S PRIZE CONTEST

THE CLUE THAT WASN'T THERE

by L. A. G. STRONG

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR ELLIS MCKay stuck out his lower lip and sat in pop-eyed contemplation of the report before him. Mason, the managing-director of the firm, watched him with covert amusement.

Ellis looked up. "You're right. It couldn't have been an accident. Any fingerprints on this metal rule?"

Detective-Inspector Bradstreet shook his head.

"No," he replied, his soft Devon accent unmistakable even in the monosyllable. "'Tis smeared, like. An odd mark or two, though."

"Mark? Made by what?"

"Can't say, not yet."

Inspector Ellis got up briskly. "Well, we'd better go to the hospital and see this chap Jervis. I'd like you to come, Mr. Mason, if you would. Make it look more like a visit of condolence. He'll talk more freely if you're with us."

Mason smiled wryly. "If you like."

"Where's the hurry?" Bradstreet wanted to know. "Why not wait till he's fit to attend the inquest?"

"I've a fancy to hear what he has to say. And if we postpone the whole inquest, folk may smell a rat. Tell me about Jervis, Mr. Mason. What's his job with the company?"

"He's the accountant. Model employee. Nobody likes him. Does his own work perfectly and criticizes others."

"What was he doing in the engine room? Surely his work didn't take him there?"

"It shouldn't, in theory. In practice, he was all over the place, poking his nose into this and that."

"Do you allow that sort of thing?"

"I've had him on the carpet about it more than once. Trouble is, he's always got a perfectly good reason. He's saved the firm a lot of money these past few years."

They found the injured accountant propped up stiffly, in a high state of indignation. At the sight of Mason he burst out immediately.

"It's exceedingly vexatious," he exclaimed. "Young Kelly interfered most unwarrantably. His action was quite uncalled for."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Jervis," Mason replied soothingly. "He only wanted to save your life, you know."

"Save my life!" the injured man barked, then winced in pain at his own vehemence. His shoulder had been badly dislocated. "Save my life! I like that, I must say. He might have injured me most seriously." He broke off and squinted anxiously at Mason. "I want to know my legal position."

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"Your *legal* position?"

"With a view to compensation."

"That's not for us to decide," Mason told him. "We hand over all that to the insurance company."

"You may find," Inspector Ellis cut in, "that the doctrine of common employment is involved."

"Common employment?" Jervis gave Inspector Ellis his attention for the first time.

"Yes," Ellis went on, shaking his head. "Tricky business. I wouldn't care to pronounce on it."

Jervis swallowed and glared. Before he could reply, Mason took his chance.

"This is Chief Detective-Inspector McKay. And Inspector Bradstreet."

Jervis eyed Ellis suspiciously.

"What's he want?"

"There has to be an inquest," Mason answered. "And since you can't attend —"

"But I must attend. It's imperative. No one else can explain —"

"That's where I come in." Ellis beamed at the flustered man. "You shall explain to me now, and Inspector Bradstreet here shall take it down word for word. We'll give you a typed copy, so that you can be sure that nothing you want to say is left out."

"It's most irregular," Jervis complained. "The inquest must be postponed."

"That's not possible, I'm afraid. But I'll see that your statement is put in, exactly as you give it."

After another brief objection Jervis gave way. It was clear that his strength was not equal to a sustained argument. Before he could get set to tell his story, Ellis startled him with a question.

"What were you doing in the engine room, Mr. Jervis? Your duties do not naturally take you there?"

The accountant's reply was a monologue, and may be so set down.

"I'd gone through to speak to Cole, the Chief Engineer, about the costings of his branch. I was not satisfied with their method of keeping accounts. Expenses not properly vouched; tools and material taken from stores without any receipt, except someone's initials scrawled on a twopenny notebook covered with oily thumb marks. Most unbusiness-like. I'd been there several times on the same errand, but had got no satisfaction — Cole simply ignored all my suggestions and advice. I was not prepared to let it go at that. It was his manifest duty to establish a proper system, and I intended to tell him straight out that, unless there was an improvement — a very definite improvement — I would take the matter to the partners.

"As I came down the stairs in the engine room, I saw Cole at the far end of the gangway, between the two turbo-alternators. He was leaning over the guard rail of Number Two, which was running. Kelly, a young fitter, was a couple of yards nearer him, oiling Number One for its next spell. We generate our own current and use the engines alternately, unless there is very heavy pressure of work, when both are needed. There should have

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been a man at the switchboard in the corner opposite the stair. No, I can't say whether he was there or not. In any case, he would have been out of my sight behind Number One. No, there was no one at the bottom of the stairs at right-angles to the gangway.

"When I reached the floor, I put on my rubber gloves, as I always do if the dynamos are working. I have been sneered at for taking this sensible precaution, but, as Mr. Mason will tell you, the firm maintains a strictly safety-first policy, and as a loyal senior official I always make a point of setting a good example."

Here Mason nodded.

"I am careful by nature," the accountant went on. "I once got a severe shock when putting in an ordinary electric light bulb — an experience which further impressed upon me to avoid unnecessary risks.

"Only a few seconds after I had put on my gloves, I heard a scream. It sank almost immediately to a whimper, and then stopped. I ran towards the gangway, and Kelly shouted to throw the switches. When I turned the corner, I could see Cole writhing across the guard rail. I ran to pull him away, but Kelly flung himself on me and knocked me down, just as the lights went out."

This was all of Jervis's statement that mattered. The rest of it was a repetition of complaints against Kelly for interfering. The idea that he should be grateful to the engineer for attempting to save his life seemed to rouse him to especial indignation. The most that Ellis and Mason could get from him was a grudging acknowledgement of Kelly's good intentions; and even these he seemed to think characteristic of a fool.

"Just one more question, Mr. Jervis," Ellis said. "I can see that you are tired, and we don't want to trouble you unduly. Can you suggest a reason for Cole's neglect in the matter of accounts?"

"Reason? The man was idle and careless. The fact that he was expert at one branch of his work did not excuse his neglecting another."

"You are convinced it was just carelessness? There was no more sinister reason? I mean — you had no grounds for suspecting any sort of hanky-panky?"

"Hanky-panky?"

"No money missing? No stores going where they shouldn't?"

Sitting up as straight as he could, the accountant glared at Ellis like an injured bird.

"You must have a very inadequate idea of my abilities as an accountant if you imagine that I should not have detected anything of that kind."

"On the contrary, Mr. Jervis, I was assuming that possibly you *had* detected something of that kind and were checking up on it."

"Your assumption is quite unjustified, sir. I will not allow you to make me impute motives of that sort. If the accounts were kept as I had shown Cole they ought to be, any leakage would be apparent at once. Automatically. Under the system or lack

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of system in the department, it could only be done at cost of much time and trouble. But I was quite capable of doing it: and did."

"Forgive me for harping on this question, Mr. Jervis, but it seems odd that Cole wasn't anxious to straighten things out, when he was responsible for them. I am just wondering whether he had any particular reason for taking the line he did?"

Jervis snorted. "Whatever such conduct might mean in other men, it was not peculiar in Cole. It was part of his character. He always played the lone wolf in the firm. Refused to cooperate. Wanted to keep everything to himself. He resented anybody, no matter how much abler than himself, taking an interest in his department. But I would never for a moment question his honesty. It is not for me to cast suspicion on the dead."

He was so indignant that it took Mason and Ellis a couple of minutes to quiet him down. They left him with promises that the typed copy of his statement should be in his hands at about tea-time that afternoon.

"Well?" Ellis looked at his two companions. "How does it strike you?"

"It seems pretty straightforward," Mason answered. "Jervis is irritating and pernickety, as you can see, but we've always found him honest to a fault, and I see no reason to doubt his word now. Do you?"

"One or two points strike me as odd, I must confess. However, I won't bother you with them at this stage. I would like someone to go over his accounts."

"*Jervis's* accounts?" Mason stared, managing to convey that the question was not quite in good taste. "Oh, certainly, if you wish."

"Tell me about Kelly. He's Cole's assistant, isn't he?"

"Yes. An excellent man. Shrewd, practical, popular with the staff."

"No grudge against Cole?"

Mason's eyes opened very wide.

"That's unimaginable," he said. "He was a most loyal assistant."

"Or against Jervis? I mean, we've all assumed that his motive was to save Jervis. Don't mind my nasty, suspicious nature — that's what I'm paid for. Kelly might have been making sure that Jervis didn't interfere before the current had done its work."

"In that case, he'd hardly have called out to throw the switches."

"It would have looked very bad if he hadn't. He may have known that the other man was some distance from them. Well, Mason, thank you very much indeed for all your help. We'll meet tomorrow at the inquest."

The inquest produced no more than Inspector Ellis intended. The first two witnesses, Cole's doctor and the police surgeon who did the post mortem, had little to say beyond agreeing that Cole's heart was not in good condition anyhow, and that his death must have been instantaneous.

Then came Kelly. The engineer harbored an obvious grievance against

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Jervis, but gave his evidence honestly and directly. Bidden by the Coroner to tell his story in his own words, he said that he was working a few yards from Mr. Cole, but didn't rightly see him killed, as his back was turned.

"I heard him scream, and I spun round, and he was squirming across the guard rail. He gave a sort of wheezing sigh, and the puff of life went out of him. I shouted to Jock to throw the switches, but it was too late. I served my time in the power station, and saw one of the lads wiped out the same way."

"What did you do next?"

"I jumped over the rail of the engine I was cleaning, and then I saw Mr. Jervis come running round the corner and making for Mr. Cole as fast as he could. I knew what would happen if he touched the body. There was no time to argue, so I gave him a Rugby tackle and brought him down before he could kill himself."

"Didn't you notice that he was wearing rubber gloves?"

"How was I to be looking whether he had rubber gloves, or a wrist watch, and I leaping on him to save his life?"

There were titters at this, promptly suppressed by the Coroner, who went on questioning Kelly, "You did your honest best to protect him from what you believed, rightly or wrongly, to be grave danger?"

"Faith, grave is the word for it, sir. I'm as sure as I'm talking to you here that I stood between that little man and his coffin, gloves or no gloves. And a fat lot of thanks I got for it."

Kelly stepped down, and the Coroner observed that it seemed clear that the first shock was fatal, and that Cole could not have been saved, even if Jervis had reached him. It might be some satisfaction to Kelly, if the jury agreed with the Coroner that Kelly had acted with great presence of mind. The jury did agree, and the Coroner added that he hoped Kelly's employers would take notice of this commendation.

At this point Bradstreet rose and asked that the inquest should be adjourned, so that an exhaustive inquiry could be made into the exact cause of the accident. The Coroner fell in with suspicious readiness.

"You have found nothing wrong with the machinery?" he inquired.

"Nothing wrong with the dynamo itself. Still, obviously, there must be something out of order or such an accident could not have happened to an experienced man."

The Coroner then addressed the jury, saying that it was evident that the deceased had met his death from electrocution, but that at that stage they were not in a position to decide how the fatal shock came to be received; and the proceedings concluded formally with an adjournment to a date three weeks later, when the inquiries should be completed, and Jervis, an important witness, would be able to attend.

What did not come out was a piece of evidence which would at once have lifted the incident to the front page of the evening papers. Bradstreet's

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reply to the Coroner had been literally true. Nothing was wrong with the dynamo itself; but it had been tampered with, so that there was a leakage of current from one of the output cables to a guard rail. A narrow slot had been cut through the insulation, probably with the edge of a file. In this was jammed one end of a folding metal rule, such as is carried by many workers in wood or iron. The metal rule was extended to its full length, and its other end had been forced under the lower guard rail and allowed to spring back, so that it remained curved like a bow in firm contact with the bared wires below and the rail above.

In Mason's opinion, and that of a consulting engineer, it was quite impossible that this could be accidental.

After the inquest Bradstreet followed one line of inquiry, Ellis another. The closest investigation of Jervis's accounts failed to uncover any irregularity. Cole's, though unsystematic, were perfectly in order. Bradstreet, however, was able to report that Kelly had been paying attention to Cole's younger daughter, and that Jervis appeared to resent this. The girl affirmed positively that she had had nothing to do with Jervis, and the information, which at first seemed to point to hostility between Jervis and Kelly, turned out to be more of a hindrance than a help.

"I believe we can do it on what we've got," Ellis said. "I'd prefer a motive, of course, but I doubt if we'll find a sane one."

"You think it's a lunatic's work?"

"You've heard and seen the same as I have, Bradstreet. What do you feel?"

The West-countryman shrugged his broad shoulders.

"There'll be a motive, all right," he said, "even if 'twouldn't be enough to make you or me do the deed."

Ellis suddenly smacked his fist into his palm.

"Mrs. Cole! He might have told her something the girl didn't know."

Bradstreet opened his eyes wide. He rose from the table and ambled out of the room. When he came back an hour later, he nodded.

"Jervis spoke to Cole about Kelly's carrying on with his daughter. Cole laughed in his face. He told Mrs. Cole it looked as if Jervis was sweet on the girl himself. Fair roared with laughter, Cole did."

"Well. What do you want now?" Jervis stared peevishly at Ellis.

For perhaps half a minute Inspector Ellis did not reply. He gazed unwaveringly at the trussed-up accountant, then slowly began to shake his head.

"You planned it neatly," he said, "But you made a mistake."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'm afraid you do."

Ellis gave him the traditional warning. Instead of turning pale, the accountant's cheeks went crimson. He stuttered for a moment indignantly; then all the fight went out of him, and he collapsed.

"My breath," he said, after a

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few seconds. "Can't — catch my — breath."

"Don't worry. I'll just ask you questions and you can shake your head or nod. You were going to retrieve the metal rule, weren't you? That's why you had the rubber gloves on?"

Jervis nodded.

"Fingerprints," he whispered. "It was worrying me. I couldn't be sure."

"No, there were no fingerprints. But rubber gloves can make marks. Sheer bad luck, from your point of view, Kelly's tackling you like that. You weren't able to get rid of the gloves. Don't try to tell us now. We can take a statement from you when you feel better."

"I will say nothing without first consulting my solicitor."

"Capital," Ellis assured him. "We'd all prefer that."

The statement ran as follows: "My solicitor has persuaded me to make this statement. He thinks it will be better for me not to give evidence at my trial. He suggests I am not well enough to do myself justice. He does not think that I shall be able to make the jury see, as I saw all the time, what a menace Cole was to the firm's very existence — quite apart from his intolerable inconvenience to me. He doesn't think it would be good tactics to prove that it wasn't my fault that the metal rule was left there. Yet Kelly was clearly responsible for that, as he is for my being here. Instead, he gets patted on the back for his presence of mind. Presence of mind, indeed! Who showed any mind at all but myself? I overlooked nothing — except that a hooligan would rush to be a cheap hero at my expense.

"I foresaw every move: the current switched off, people afraid to stir in the darkness, while I, knowing every inch of the way, could slip along in the confusion to whip out the rule and get back with it safely in my pocket to Cole's body. Twenty seconds would have been ample for me. I know, because I practised and timed it often when I was working late. I used to wait till I saw the watchman cross the yard for his tea, and I knew the place was empty. Then I would go down to the engine room, work for a few minutes with my file at the cable, carefully covering the cut with insulating tape so that it would not show; then a quick walk to and from the engine, with my watch in my hand; and back to my room, for the watchman to find me busy over my accounts.

"I took no risks. After all my preparations were made, I went to the spot half a dozen times before the right moment came. Some of the times Cole was not near the engines, or someone was standing where he would see me. Three times I got back unnoticed. And the other evening I talked with Cole. He had a stock catchword which he repeated like a parrot, until it made me almost physically sick.

"'How is *H.M.S. Indispensable* today?' he would ask, and bray with laughter. The man's insolence was un-

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bearable. It had grown worse since that other matter, when I did no more than my duty by speaking to him. A girl of that age needs someone older, wiser, more experienced. In any case, she cannot judge for herself.

"But I thought it wiser not to show any resentment. I would even force a smile. I wondered what his fat jeering face would look like if he realized what my business was.

"My solicitor says that Counsel for the prosecution would make much of the fact that I wore rubber gloves, and that the jury would not believe my explanation. I cannot see why; it was a rational precaution that any prudent man would take. If I felt better, and stronger, I would have rejected his advice, and not listened to that fat red-haired detective. At least, he calls himself a detective, though I must say he does not look like one. . . ."

The document rambled and became incoherent after this, with Jervis repeating himself again and again. Whether it was due to the shock, whether the fall merely speeded up what was happening anyway, or whether he started off his balance, nobody could be sure. By the time he came up for trial, however, there was no doubt at all, and after a brief hearing the Judge directed that the punctilious accountant be detained during His Majesty's pleasure.

As Ellis commented to Bradstreet, nothing makes the police more suspicious than *not* finding fingerprints where they would naturally expect them . . .

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In our August issue we presented you with a story and a problem in detection. The story was Lawrence G. Blochman's "The Girl With the Burgundy Lips," and the problem was to find the twenty errors deliberately introduced into the text. We offered cash prizes to those readers who correctly listed and most clearly explained all twenty errors. The names of the seventeen prize-winners are on page 29. And, just in case you're still looking for the twenty mistakes, here is the author's own catalogue of errors and the author's own explanatory notes.

TWENTY ERRORS
in "The Girl With the Burgundy Lips"

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

1. "*Take arsenic, for instance.*"
The action of arsenic is gastro-intestinal and it does *not* produce symptoms of suffocation as do cyanide, pure nicotine, and other poisons which paralyze the respiratory centers.

2. "*What does the Coroner say . . .?*"
New York City jettisoned its obsolete, politics-ridden Coroner system in 1918. For more than 30 years sudden and unexplained deaths have been the province of the highly skilled, highly scientific, highly non-political Medical Examiner's Office — without benefit of Coroner's inquest.

3. ". . . *constitutional rights under the Sixth Amendment.*"
Freedom of the press is guaranteed by the *First* Amendment.

4. "*He was as bald as a chinchilla.*"
The furry chinchilla is far from bald. Custer was obviously thinking of a Chihuahua, the Mexican hairless dog.

5. ". . . *writ of replevin.*"
A writ of replevin is issued to secure the release of *property* wrongly detained. *Persons* wrongfully detained may be released by a writ of habeas corpus.

6, 7. ". . . *imported Pilsner beer and Limburger cheese . . . just arrived from Germany.*"
Pilsner beer is made in Czechoslovakia. Limburger cheese comes from the old Dutch province of Limburg, now divided between Holland and Belgium.

8. ". . . *the ruddy complexion of a morphine addict.*"
Morphine addiction renders the complexion sallow and pasty.

9. "*Bronze is the mirror of the form; wine, of the heart.*"
Shakespeare didn't say it. Aeschylus, the famous Greek poet, did.

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10. ". . . *bubbles of carbon disulphide. . . .*"
Carbon dioxide (*not* carbon disulphide) is used for the artificial carbonation of synthetic sparkling wines.

11. ". . . *the best Burgundy I have ever tasted.*"
Château Margaux is a famous Bordeaux, *not* a Burgundy.

12. "*Love is strong as death; jealousy as cruel as the grave.*"
Shakespeare didn't say this, either. Solomon did — in *The Song of Songs.*

13. ". . . *a fat, pot-bellied bottle of French Rhine wine . . .*"
True Rhine wine, French as well as German, comes in tall, thin, gracefully tapering bottles. Some South American wines, similar to Rhine wines, are put up in fat, pot-bellied bottles.

14. "*Centre Street . . . to look at the Homicide Squad in its native habitat.*"
Although headquarters of the New York Police Department is in Centre Street, the Homicide Squad long operated out of the West 20th Street Station (10th Precinct). Today there are two Homicide Squads; Manhattan West, still doing business in West 20th Street, and Manhattan East, at the 19th Precinct Station in East 67th Street.

15. ". . . *you must have developed some fingerprints.*"
Latent fingerprints are made by body oils secreted by the pores along the ridges of fingertip patterns. They cannot be developed from an oily surface, such as the human skin.

16. "*That rules out strangulation.*"
On the contrary. Small subcutaneous hemorrhages in the scalp are definitely symptoms of strangulation.

17. "*Lots of burnt umber and madder.*"
These pigments would give a red tone, not blue.

18. "*Tempera is a kind of paint made with a base of shrimp paste.*"
Tempera colors are made with an albuminous base, usually white of egg. The Japanese sea-food fritter is usually transliterated as *tempura.*

19. ". . . *benzene test.*"
The common presumptive test for bloodstains is the benzidine test — *not* benzene.

20. ". . . *a few drops of chlorophyll in his wine.*"
Cholorophyll, the green coloring agent in plants (and currently, in toothpaste), is neither an opiate nor a narcotic. Custer meant chloral hydrate or chloroform.

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FLORIAN SLAPPEY, PRIVATE EYE

by OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

THE OFFICE WAS ON THE FOURTH floor of the Penny Prudential Bank Building in Birmingham, Alabama. The bright new lettering on the door was highly impressive:

FLORIAN SLAPPEY
PRIVATE EYE
"All I Need Is One Clue & $25."

In the upper lefthand corner was the office number: 410. The upper right was decorated with the sign-painter's conception of a human optic, with the word "Private" lettered underneath. The eye had heavy lids, long lashes, and quite a hunk of iris, creating a somewhat startling effect.

Inside, the sanctuary was divided into a pair of cubicles. There was an outer office with a window and a door, the latter bearing the invitation, "Walk In." It contained a desk, an ancient swivel chair, two somewhat rickety straight chairs and a filing cabinet. The infinitesimal outer office was equipped with a typewriter table, a secondhand typewriter, four chairs and secretary Rosabel Johnson.

This was Miss Johnson's first day as the one and only employee of Private Eye Slappey, and she was properly impressed. She regarded her debonair employer with a look akin to awe as she questioned him about her duties and his new profession.

"How come," she inquired, "you calls yo'se'f 'Private Eye' instead of 'detective'?"

Mr. Slappey gazed at her with slight disdain. "Yo' outlook is absolete, Miss Johnson. Ev'y confidential investigator today is called a private eye. Is you got a radio?"

"I sho' has, Mistuh Slappey."

"Well, don't you listen to all them programs about fellers tracin' criminals to their lair? Them detectives is new an' modern an' up-to-date. They calls theirse'ves Private Eyes."

"You mean like Sam Spade an' The Thin Man an' The Amazin' Mistuh Malone?"

"Yeah. Fust thing you know they is gwine be callin' me Slippery Slappey, The Super-Sloth."

Her eyes grew round with wonder. "Them gemmun," she said, "always git beat up somethin' fierce."

"I know. They git pistol-whipped. But they triumph in the end."

"Fum what I done heard on the air, it seems to me that they wouldn't hardly have one end left to triumph with." Miss Johnson touched a small box on her desk and designated a similar one which perched on the desk in the other office. "What is them, Mistuh Slappey?"

"They is inter-com. When a client comes in, you tell him Ise busy. Then you git his name. Then you press the buzzer an' denounce him to me."

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"But," she said, puzzled. "They ain't wired up."

"Ain't no use doin' that," responded Florian reasonably. "I can heah you over the transom."

He extracted an enameled cigarette case from the inside pocket of his tweed jacket, fired up, and regarded his new secretary through a haze of fragrant smoke. "Ise studyin' to smoke a pipe," he told her. "But I ain't gittin' ve'y far. Kinda makes me sick. All the other rules, though, Miss Johnson — you got to learn."

"Like for instance?"

"Like what happens to all these other private eyes. They all got beautiful secretaries which is in love with them."

"You mean that I —"

"That's the one thing I don't mean nothin' else but. The public especks certain things an' we got to give it to 'em. So you has got to be in love with me, but it ain't gonna git you nowhere on account I is tough an' hard-boiled. Always my regard fo' you is gwine remain splutonic."

"My boy friend will depreciate that."

"Also, you got to be prepared fo' not gittin' paid on payday, 'ceptin' that when I break a big case, why then I always give you what I owe, an' a bonus besides. This ain't like no ordinary business, Miss Johnson. It is filled with high excitement an' grave danger. In other words, it's just lousy with vicissitudes."

"What's them?"

"Don't matter what they is. Tha's what the radio narrators always say, an' since I ain't able to afford no narrator of my own, I got to use the words myse'f. So now —," he moved to the door of his private office and stood smiling at her, "so now we commences."

"Commences what?"

"Waitin' fo' clients. Ise gwine surround myse'f with a lot of solitude, an' take my bottle out of the bottom drawer."

"Shuh! Florian — you don't drink."

"No. But I got to have a bottle in my desk, otherwise I woul'n't be no legal private eye."

"What do I do while you is solitudin'?"

"Arrange the files."

"They ain't nothin' in them files."

"Well, git 'em so they can be arranged when somethin' does git in 'em. Leave plenty of space under the *C*'s an' *I*'s."

"What's the *C* for?"

"Clues."

"An' the *I*?"

"Impawtant clues."

Mr. Slappey closed the door gently, seated himself in his swivel chair, swung it around so that it faced the window, and looked happily out upon the city of Birmingham with its background of steel mills on one side and mountains on the other.

He was, as always, optimistic. And even though business should be meager at first, he felt that he already had achieved a considerable degree of prestige in the colored community.

He had distributed cards with a

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lavish hand, announcing to all and sundry that he had started private-eying. Hundreds of these had been dumped in the lodge rooms of The Sons & Daughters of I Will Arise, at the headquarters of The Over the River Burying Society and at Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room & Billiard Parlor. He had purchased an ancient sectional bookcase and had started a library, featuring such works as Sodermann & O'Connell's "Modern Criminal Investigation," The Penal Code, and assorted works of Erle Stanley Gardner, Agatha Christie, Brett Halliday, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. He felt that he was adequately prepared for anything which might show up, and he paused long enough to hope that it would show up soon because his exchequer was in a rather sadly depleted condition.

But when several days had passed and no clients had materialized, Mr. Slappey commenced to experience the first faint stirrings of doubt, even though his journeys through the business and residential sections of the neighborhood were almost triumphal processions, and he was obviously held in high esteem by such old cronies as Lawyer Evans Chew, Epic Peters, Dr. Lijah Atcherson and Jasper de Void.

On the fifth day, however, something happened. Private Eye Slappey was engrossed in some particularly gory photographs of murder scenes when he heard voices in the outer office. Then he heard Miss Johnson — ostensibly speaking through the intercom, but actually availing herself of the open transom — saying, "Does you wish to consult Mistuh Slappey professional?"

"I sho' do," rumbled a large masculine voice.

"He's all tied up with a lot of investigations."

"Tell him it's Gus Trout. I aim to hire him right away."

Gus Trout. Florian frowned. The name was vaguely familiar, but only vaguely. Not a regular Birmingham resident: in that case, Mr. Slappey would have known all about him. And yet . . .

"Someone to see me?" he asked through the transom.

"Yassuh. A big, han'some man named Mistuh Trout."

"Ise immersed," stated Florian. "But send him in anyway."

The man who was ushered in by Rosabel Johnson was very large, very dark and disconcertingly muscular. He said Howdy to Florian and jerked his head at the secretary. "Send her out," he ordered.

"Huh?"

"What Ise got to talk to you about is private, Mistuh Slappey."

"What you want her to do?"

"Get lost."

"Okay, Miss Johnson. Go git lost. An' while you is out, inquire if them spectroscopes has come back fum Washin'ton yet. Also find out if our Operative X has got them mug shots of Homicide Harry. Also git me a barbecue samwich with sauce."

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Miss Johnson departed. Gus Trout was regarding Mr. Slappey with an inscrutable expression. "Seems like you got plenty of business, Mistuh Slappey."

"Yeh. Us private eyes is always preoccupied. Now, then, Mistuh Trout, what can I do for you?"

The ebony giant hesitated, but only briefly. Then he said, "I ain't been long in Bumminham. Me an' my wife, Verna, is livin' in our own house trailer. We got it parked just off Avenue F, near Sis Callie Flukers' boardin' house."

"Tha's where I live at."

"I know. I done found out all about you, Brother Slappey. I wouldn't hire me just *any* private eye. Who I require has got to be somebody special."

"Astuteness," stated Florian, "is the most thing I got."

"How would you like," inquired Mr. Trout, "to make $100 cash money?"

"In advance?"

"When you solve the case."

Florian tried to conceal his disappointment. He would have welcomed $25 advance with even greater warmth than the prospect of $100 in the future, but he reckoned things like that had to be taken in stride. He said, "Tell me ev'ything, Brother Trout. Don't hold back nothin'."

Gus Trout's story was simple. It appeared that he was a gentleman of considerable worth, and that all his worldly possessions were kept in the house trailer in which he and his wife lived. According to his story, they had, in the course of several years, accumulated quite a store of watches, rings, pendants and other gewgaws of considerable value.

"An' right recent," he stated darkly, "some dirty, no-good, slab-sided hunk of tripe been robbin' our trailer when we wasn't there. A'ready he gotten away with about $1,000 wuth of stuff. Does you git 'em back fo' me, you git that hund'ed dollars cash. It's as simple as that."

"Sho' is," agreed Mr. Slappey. "Ain't it?" He started making notes on a piece of paper. "You got any suspicions, Brother Trout?"

"Yassuh. I sho' have."

"What's his name?"

"You know a feller called Neuritis Mapes?"

"Long, tall an' kind of meager?"

"Tha's the one."

"I know him," admitted Florian. "An' I don't know him. What I mean is, I an' him says Hello when we pass each other — but the point is that we pass. We never stop fo' no talk." He eyed his client. "How come you think Mistuh Mapes done burgled you?"

"I met him two-th'ee times, an' once he come to the trailer to visit I an' Verna. He looked aroun' mighty careful."

"Casing the joint, huh?"

"What kind of talk is that?"

"Private Eye talk. Now, what else makes you think Neuritis is susceptible?"

"Since us lost the fust of our joolry, I been sort of watchin'. I seen

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sev'al shadders that looked like they might of been cast by Brother Mapes. Tell me, Mistuh Slappey, how does this feller make a livin'?"

"Ain't nobody knows that fo' sure. He lives in Sally Crouch's Cozy Home Hotel, an' he don't mix aroun' much. Seems like he's always got enough money, but I ain't never seed him doin' no work."

Mr. Trout produced a piece of paper and shoved it across the desk toward Florian. "There's the list of ev'ything me an' Verna had stole fum us. I ain't sayin' positive it was Neuritis Mapes: If I knowed it was, I'd bust him up into li'l pieces. Fust of all I need proof. Then I aim to git my stuff back. Tha's where you come in."

Mr. Slappey nodded. He said, "Seems like the best thing I can do is to put a tail on Mistuh Mapes —"

"Says which?"

"A tail. Somebody to foller him ev'ywhere an' scrutinize his demeanor. I'll assign one of my best operatives."

"Who?"

"Me." Mr. Slappey did some heavy thinking. "Why didn't you take this case to the police, Brother Trout?"

"'Cause I ain't posolutely sure. Was I to tell them it was Neuritis Mapes an' they arrested the guy, an' if it was a diff'ent feller, why then Neuritis would sue me fo' false arrest. This is strickly a Private Eye job."

"You is a gemmun of discernment, Brother Trout. An' leave me git this straight: The minute I recover these heah articles of joolry which maybe Neuritis Mapes stole offen you, I git one hund'ed dollars cash reward. Right?"

"Right."

"So now I got to git information. Is yo' house trailer locked at all times?"

"Yeh. Same key wuks fum both inside an' out. But they ain't nothin' hard 'bout pickin' that lock. If a feller knows the least li'l bitty thing about burgling, he could git in easy."

"Looks like I better go to yo' trailer with you an' inspeck the scene of the crime. Also dust fo' prints. Then I better git straight in my mind about the *corpus delicti*."

"Who he?"

"Tain't no 'he'. It means the body of the crime."

"An' after you got that . . . ?"

"Private Eye Slappey proceeds by his own methods. He ain't tellin' nobody his *modus operandi*."

"Boy!" said the large Mr. Trout, visibly impressed. "You sho' do ooze language."

From the bottom drawer of his desk, Private Eye Slappey took a small box marked Fingerprint Kit. He wasn't quite certain how to use it, but felt that it would impress his client as well as himself.

He said, "Leave us be on our way," and started for the outer office. There he encountered the pulchritudinous Rosabel Johnson. "Where at is my samwich?" inquired Florian.

"I lef' it at Bud Peaglar's."

"How come?"

"I didn't have no two bits an' you didn't have no credit."

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"That Bud!" snapped Florian. "Always makin' jokes." He gazed sternly at Rosabel. "You stay right heah until I return back, Miss Johnson. When the office commences to fill up with clients, you take down their prognosisses, an' arrange them in alphabetic order. An' you might also fix up that special file of our'n: the one we call 'Cases Already Solved by Slappey.' "

"Yes, darlin'."

"An' don't be sweet-talkin' me in front of strangers. Us is supposed to keep that fo' private."

"Ise sorry, Chief. But I cain't he'p . . ."

Florian grabbed Mr. Trout's arm and hustled him toward the elevator. "Private Eyes," he grumbled. "We all got troubles. Seems like it ain't possible to git no secretary without she falls in love with you."

Mr. Trout's somewhat asthmatic car — the one which, as he explained, supplied the motive power for his house trailer — was parked on Fourth Avenue. He climbed in one side and Florian clambered in the other. They turned south, bumped across the L. & N. tracks and made their way to the vacant lot on the South Side where Gus's home was parked.

It was a nice enough trailer. Mr. Slappey tried not to betray the fact that he was impressed. But he was. Here was a man who owned a car and a trailer, and who was rich enough to have been robbed of $1,000 worth of stuff. More and more it became apparent that Mr. Trout was a client worthy of Florian's steel.

In answer to Gus's thunderous knock, Verna Trout opened the trailer door. She was a buxom lass, rather addicted to avoirdupois, but pleasant looking for all that.

This was Mr. Slappey's first opportunity to perform like a detective, and he made the most of it. He fired questions at Mrs. Trout. It seemed that on several occasions Verna had seen a long, lean gentleman prowling in the neighborhood, and each time there had been a burglary shortly thereafter. Once, she said, she had gotten a good look at the suspect and then had seen Neuritis Mapes the next day. She was convinced — though she wouldn't exactly swear to it — that he was their man.

They conducted Florian inside the trailer. They showed Florian a tiny chest of drawers. The bottom one showed signs of having been worked over with a heavy instrument.

"Tha's the one they prized loose," explained Verna. "Us kept most of our joolry in there."

Florian nodded sagely. He inspected the damaged drawer inside and out. Then he opened his fingerprint kit. He tried to recall the directions, and, failing that, dipped his brush into a little bottle of powdered graphite and brushed it over all adjacent areas. Then he produced several sheets of paper and pressed them against the surfaces. He was rewarded with several smudges, but since — obviously — his clients knew even less than he did, he wasn't worried that they would detect any inefficiency.

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During the procedure, Mr. Trout hovered over Florian, making guttural sounds. It appeared that Gus was considerably wrought up, not alone by the financial loss, but also by the sheer effrontery of the burglar. "If'n I ever know fo' sure it was Neuritis Mapes — an' if'n I git my han's on him, that feller is gwine git mayhammed."

Mr. Slappey stopped long enough to inspect the massive frame of Gus Trout. He was very glad that he was not Mr. Mapes because Gus seemed overendowed with physical prowess.

Eventually the job was done. Gus drove Florian downtown and deposited him in front of Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room & Billiard Parlor. After promising his client that he would stick to the case as closely as a hound dog to a possum trail, Florian went into Bud's place and talked the proprietor into crediting him with one good meal: namely, two barbecue sandwiches, two cups of coffee, one bowl of Brunswick stew and a large slice of lemon pie.

Mournfully, Mr. Peaglar noted the additional indebtedness in his day book. "Sho' is a lot of money you ain't never gwine pay me, Florian."

Mr. Slappey chose to regard this as friendly badinage. "You gits paid all that — an' mo'." He lowered his voice and beckoned his friend closer. "What you know 'bout Neuritis Mapes, Bud?"

Mr. Peaglar said something profane. "What I ain't got fo' him is no use," he declared.

"Just 'tween I an' you, Bud — would you say he was nefarious?"

"I sho' would. Dishonest, too."

"How you know?"

"Nobody knows. But he's always got plenty money an' he ain't got no divisible means of support." Bud was becoming interested. "He been up to somethin'?"

"Ise tailin' him," confided Florian. "Mind you, I ain't accusin' him of nothin', an' Ise sayin' even less. But if'n he done what I think he done, an' if I can prove it . . ."

"Who he done it to?"

"Tha's a secret, Bud. An' look, next time he comes in heah, you give him a glass of water. But when he finishes, you keep the glass."

"Why?"

"Fingerprints."

"What you fixin' to do with them?"

"I dunno," confessed Florian. "But the books says I got to have 'em."

Mr. Slappey returned to his office and its appalling dearth of new clients. Rosabel Johnson was wrestling somewhat futilely with a cross-word puzzle. She said, "What us ain't got, Florian, is no business — 'ceptin' only that big feller that come to see you. Did he give you any money?"

"Not yet. But as soon as I solve the case . . ."

"You reckon you will?"

"I got to." There was a hint of desperation in Mr. Slappey's voice. "Otherwise, us is gwine git infected with a bad case of bankruptcy."

That night Mr. Slappey started active investigation of Neuritis Mapes.

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He stalked the hotel where Mr. Mapes resided, and picked up that gentleman when he emerged.

It was not too difficult to tail his quarry. Neuritis was thin as a matchstick, but much taller. He towered above his brethren on 18th Street, and when he slipped into a movie, Florian followed.

The feature picture was a cops-and-robbers thing, featuring a private eye. In the picture this gentleman was rather brutally handled, but he emerged triumphant, confounded the police with his explanation of how he had done what he had done, and then married the beautiful heroine. All of this thrilled Florian. Except the marriage part. Mr. Slappey was a confirmed misogynist.

Three nights in a row he tailed Neuritis Mapes. He discovered only one thing about the suspect: That he was a man of fixed habits, and a motion picture addict. Each night he took in a movie, and on the third night Florian waited outside in the rain for the sole and simple reason that he didn't have the price of admission. He was becoming more and more aware that he'd better bring this case to a successful conclusion.

There were considerations other than mere survival. What the Slappey Agency needed was one successful case, solving a crime problem so brilliantly that Birmingham colored folks would go get themselves in trouble just for the sake of having Florian pull them out.

What he required more than anything else was achievement; good, solid accomplishment. And it rapidly became apparent that Gus and Verna Trout were sharing his view. They called upon him twice, Verna critical and Mr. Trout belligerent.

"What I deman' is action," he roared. "I got to have results. 'Tain't no use esplainin' to me you is follerin' that ornery drink of water aroun' town ev'y night. That ain't gittin' me back my joolry."

"B-b-but Mistuh Trout . . ."

"Don't but me, feller. I know who stole them things offa me, an' you know who stole 'em. All you got to do is git the evidence that say so."

"What would I do with it?"

"Confront Neuritis Mapes with it. Fling it right in his ugly face. He'd give you back the stuff, all right."

Muttering threats, Gus Trout departed, leaving Mr. Slappey wallowing in the slough of despond. Seemed like nothing never come out good.

"I know Neuritis is guilty," reflected Florian sadly, "an' Neuritis knows he's guilty. But how is I ever gwine make Neuritis know I know it?"

It was maddening. It was a situation which wasn't to be stood, nohow, no time. And because he was desperate, Mr. Slappey hit upon a frightening but efficient plan.

What he proposed to do was to break into Mr. Mapes' room at the Cozy Home Hotel, shake it down, and establish once and for all whether Neuritis really was guilty as suspected.

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Mr. Slappey did some good hot sleuthing. He drifted into the Cozy Home Hotel and dazzled Sally Crouch with a box of candy. Since Miss Crouch was a maiden lady with a considerable amount of heft and no semblance of beauty, she was swept off her feet by this display of interest on the part of Birmingham's Beau Brummel.

Struggling to conceal the object of his mission, and keeping Miss Crouch neatly buttered up, Mr. Slappey learned certain facts concerning Mr. Mapes.

He discovered that the number of Neuritis's room was 212, that he frequently entertained visitors who seemed always to leave the room looking more forlorn than when they arrived, that he always had money but that the source of his income was a mystery to Sally Crouch. He also learned that Neuritis possessed a large trunk which was always locked. Mr. Slappey thereupon bade Sally a hasty farewell, brought a flutter to her large bosom by promising to see her again, and went out to buy himself a cold chisel and a hammer . . . instruments which he expected to use if his collection of keys failed to open Mr. Mapes' trunk.

When Mr. Mapes emerged from the hotel that night, Florian was lurking in the shadows. He waited patiently while Neuritis ate a slow and solemn meal. He followed his suspect to the newest movie house and saw him safely inside. Then Florian raced back to the Cozy Home.

He waited until the lobby was empty, then eased inside, grabbed the pass key which he had spotted that afternoon during his interview with Sally Crouch, and made his way to the second floor. It was the work of only a moment to let himself into room 212.

With fingers that shook, he tried his collection of keys on the lock of Mr. Mapes' trunk. No dice. He then produced his hammer and cold chisel. In a few seconds the trunk was open and Mr. Slappey — perspiring profusely — started going through it.

He probed through one drawer, then another. He opened the third, yanked the lid off a box, and his eyes popped. He said, "Hot diggity dog! I got it!"

Jewelry. Watches, rings, pendants, earrings, cigarette lighters and cases, brooches, pins . . . all glittering and gleaming up at him. There was the whole story right before his eyes: He had uncovered the lair of a really astute burglar, he had solved his first case, justice had triumphed, he had out-amazed Mr. Malone and out-thinned the Thin Man.

Thing to do now, he reflected, was to gather together the exact items of which the Trouts had been robbed. Later, he'd consider what to do with the information he had uncovered. He had a hunch that he was on the verge of solving a lot of burglaries, for each of which he'd collect a handsome fee.

He dragged the Trouts' list out of his pocket, and readily identified each

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of the items. He took those and no more. He stuffed them in his pocket, wiped away some of his fingerprints, tried without success to repair the lock he had damaged, and then left.

He pussyfooted down the stairway and once again waited until the lobby was clear. It was the work of only a few seconds to replace the pass key and make his escape. In the street, headed south, he once again breathed deeply and freely.

He walked all the way to Avenue F. He found the house trailer with the car standing nearby. He rapped on the door and announced himself.

Mr. and Mrs. Trout seemed to have been about to retire. They looked at him without warmth and wanted to know what he meant by bothering them at this time of night.

"You got one hund'ed dollars cash money on you, Brother Trout?" Florian inquired.

"Yeh."

"Leave me see it."

Gus Trout extracted a fat wallet and took $100 from it. "Now," he asked, "what's it all about?"

Mr. Slappey reached into his pocket. Piece by piece, he produced the missing jewelry, savoring each delicious moment of triumph. The eyes of Gus and his wife bugged out, and they made exclamations of surprise and delight.

"It's all there," stated Florian. "Ev'y last piece of it."

They agreed that it was. They were almost hysterical with delight. There was no protest over paying Florian his $100 reward, and when he finally departed it was with a song on his lips and optimism in his heart.

He went to his room in Sis Callie Flukers' boarding house, but didn't turn in. He pulled a chair up to the window and sat contemplating his own greatness. From where he was sitting he could see faintly the weedy lot in which the Trout trailer was parked. The moon was brilliant, the visibility good.

He saw two figures moving about near the trailer. One man, one woman. Couldn't be anyone except Gus and Verna Trout. But why? When he'd barged in on them, they'd been ready to retire. Now, they were dressed.

He saw their automobile pull out of the lot and roar toward town. That gave him further pause. They seemed to be in a hurry. He remembered an all-night market which was located in the general direction they had taken. An idea — a hunch — something — grabbed him, and he said, "Seems like this is somethin' Private Eye Slappey better had look into."

He left the boarding house and walked swiftly back to the lot. The car had vanished, but the trailer was still there. He withdrew into the shadows of a clump of hollyhocks and waited . . . and wondered.

"This don't figure," he told himself. "It don't figure at all."

After a long, long time the Trout car returned. Mr. and Mrs. Trout alighted. They commenced storing bags of groceries in the trailer. They

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seemed to be in high good humor, yet there was something in the quality of their merriment which was sour.

Mr. Slappey strained his ears, but it was not until all their provisions had been stored and they started attaching the trailer to the car that Florian was able to catch their conversation.

"That Florian Slappey," stated Gus to his wife, "we sho' made a sucker out of him."

Verna laughed merrily. "The po' tripe," she said. "Callin' hisse'f a detective an' never figurin' we was usin' him to swipe more than one thousand dollars wuth of stuff fo' us."

"Suttinly was a cute scheme," Gus gloated. "It popped into my head when I fust went to see Neuritis Mapes. Somebody had tol' me he was in the business of lendin' money. I pawned that ol' bracelet of yours with him, an' when he put it away I had a chance to study all the other stuff he had. What I remembered, I put down on our list, an' tha's what I tol' ol' dumbbell Slappey us had lost. By tomorrow mawnin', honey, we'll be long gone fum Bumminham an' we'll sell all this joolry in the next town we git to."

"An' the best part of it," chuckled Verna, "is that if anybody gits into trouble fo' burgling Neuritis Mapes, it will be Florian Slappey."

Gus was still wrestling with the car. He asked, "Where you put that joolry?"

"In the second dresser drawer in the trailer. C'mon, Gus — git busy. Us got to be travelin'."

An awful sensation swept through Mr. Slappey. He had heard the words clearly, but their meaning was too terrible to absorb in a moment.

Now it hit violently. He'd been outsmarted. He'd been used as a catspaw, set up as a patsy. He had committed an out-and-out burglary in the mistaken belief that he was merely recovering stolen property.

He was suffused with mixed sensations of righteous fury and profound indignation. He considered confronting Mr. Trout right then and there, but a second look at that gentleman's Gargantaun frame and bulging muscles caused him to change his mind.

Yet he knew he had to do something immediate and drastic. Once the Trouts had left town he'd have no idea where to locate them. Nor could he enlist the aid of the police, because in that event he'd have to tell the truth about his part in the affair, and he had more than a mere suspicion that they might not believe his story.

Gus Trout finished his job. He climbed behind the wheel of the automobile, and Verna got in beside him. He pressed the starter, but nothing happened. Gus swore, climbed down, and lifted the hood of the car. And that was when Florian — impelled by desperation and a sense of outrage — acted.

Mr. Slappey slipped out of the gloom, approached the trailer from the off-side, and, protected temporarily by the noise of Gus Trout working on his balky motor, let himself

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into the trailer. All he wanted was to recover the stuff he unwittingly had stolen from Neuritis Mapes.

The trailer gave a lurch which sent Mr. Slappey sprawling. Florian peeked out the window and saw houses flitting by. Horror clutched him, and he said, "Oh! Woe is me! I done got myse'f in a sling, sho' 'nough."

Mr. Trout was driving south, and he was driving fast. He was headed in the general direction of Montgomery, Mobile and New Orleans. "An' where he stops," moaned Florian, "nobody knows. Especially me."

He decided on a desperate and dangerous course of action. He'd grab Neuritis Mapes' jewelry, and make a leap for life the first time the car and trailer slowed down. He knew he might bust himself up in the process, but that was a chance he had to take.

He opened the second drawer of the compact dresser. The stuff was there, all right. Florian crammed it into his coat pocket. Then he went to the door and waited.

The trailer was rolling and rocking. Without doubt all the driver wanted between him and Birmingham was distance and a lot of it. Horrible thoughts came to the trapped Private Eye. Suppose they never slowed down, suppose he opened the door and jumped into the night and really smashed himself! Suppose . . . he shook his head and decided miserably that he'd better quit supposing. Each suppose seemed worse than the last.

And then, just when Florian had commenced to give up hope, the motor began to cough and stutter. The trailer slowed down. Now, he reflected, now was the time.

He acted on instinct. He opened the door, gazed with horror at the wild country through which they were passing, drew a deep breath, closed his eyes — and jumped.

The ground he hit was hard and unyielding. He rolled over and over, and finally fetched up in a dry ditch. Far down the road he could see the tail lights of his erstwhile prison vanishing. He breathed a sigh of relief. Even if Gus and Verna heard the banging of the open trailer door and stopped to investigate, they'd never suspect what had happened. And if they did, they couldn't find Mr. Slappey. Not in this darkness where he was surrounded by nothing but a lot of Alabama.

Florian stood up. He was bruised and battered, but not permanently injured. He touched his wallet — it was still in his hip pocket — containing the $100 reward money Gus and Verna had given him. The jewelry he had recovered was in the side pocket of his coat.

He still faced problems, but anything seemed minor after the awful situation from which he had just extracted himself. And he had no fear of the Trouts. When they discovered their loss, they'd be unable to figure what had happened. Certainly, they couldn't connect Florian with it — and, even if they did, they'd never dare return to Birmingham because they'd then have the law to face.

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He stumbled across the road. His first efforts to thumb a ride met with disheartening results.

Then he got a break. A dilapidated truck, loaded with vegetables for the Birmingham market, coughed up the road. A dusky gentleman was at the wheel. Florian stepped into the path of the vehicle and waved his arms. The truck stopped. Florian handed the driver a $5 bill in exchange for transportation back to town.

The driver was not loquacious, and Mr. Slappey was content to be left alone with his thoughts. Now that he was safe from extermination at the hands of Gus Trout, he found himself faced by a problem only slightly less acute.

In his pocket he had all of the jewelry he had swiped from Neuritis Mapes. Mr. Mapes must long since have discovered the burglary. There was even a chance that Florian had been seen slipping into, or out of, Sally Crouch's Cozy Home Hotel for the Colored.

Of only one thing was Florian sure: In some way he must return the jewelry to Mapes, and yet keep his identity concealed. That in itself was no small task. Having been burglarized once, Neuritis would be taking added precautions.

"I don't know what to do," reflected Florian. "But I sho' got to do it quick."

He left the truck at Avenue F and staggered to his room at Sis Callie's boarding house. He ached all over. He took off his clothes and sprawled out on the bed. His situation was good only by comparison with what it might have been. Neuritis Mapes worried him. The tall gent was the type to make trouble just for the sake of trouble.

Eventually Florian slept. He awoke at 8 o'clock, and dressed without enthusiasm. He was fresh out of ideas, and as he put on his clothes, the jewelry in the side pocket of the coat seemed to weigh a ton.

He went to Bud Peaglar's place, drank four cups of coffee, smoked half a pack of cigarettes, and refused to indulge in any conversation. Bud said, "You look like you just come fum yo' own funeral, Brother Slappey."

"I doggone near did," confessed Florian.

He proceeded wearily to his office, said a languid Good Morning to Rosabel Johnson, entered his inner sanctum, closed the door and then stacked Neuritis Mapes' jewelry in a drawer of his filing cabinet. He locked the drawer.

He was plenty worried. "What I got to do," he reflected, "is to unburglarize Brother Mapes, an' all these heah books ain't got no instructions 'bout how to do that."

The morning dragged interminably. Florian did nothing but think in circles while Rosabel Johnson practiced writing "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party." Nobody seemed to be getting anywhere.

At precisely ten minutes after 11 o'clock the door of the outer office

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opened and Florian heard a thin, nasal, unpleasant voice inquiring for him. Miss Johnson went into her rehearsal routine about Private Eye Slappey being engrossed in important matters, and while she was in the middle of it the visitor flung open the door.

"My name," he announced belligerently, "is Neuritis Mapes."

Florian winced. He motioned Mr. Mapes to a chair and glanced through the window, wondering whether a man would bounce very hard if he jumped out of a fourth-story window.

"Mistuh Slappey," whined Neuritis, "I been burgled."

Florian started to say, "*You're* telling *me?*" and choked back the words just in time.

"Some dirty crook stole a heap of joolry offen me. You heah what Ise sayin'?"

Miserably, Florian admitted that he heard. He wondered why Neuritis insisted on torturing him; why he didn't come right out with the accusation. And then, as though from a great distance, he heard words of hope, "An' what I come heah fo', Mistuh Slappey, was to hire you to find that stolen joolry an' return it to me."

"Huh?"

"You is a Private Eye, ain't you?"

Florian gulped. Nimble-witted as he usually was, he was a long time pulling himself together. He eyed Neuritis narrowly to ascertain whether he was being kidded. The answer was No; definitely No.

Florian said, "How come you to seek me out 'stid of goin' to the police, Brother Mapes?"

Neuritis was hesitant. Then he confided his reason. It appeared that he had been engaged in the business of lending money on jewelry without the formality of having taken out a license, and he was afraid of complications if the police ever got wind of it. "So this is all gwine be just 'tween us two, Brother Slappey, just you an' me."

The pieces were falling into place. Florian felt his spirits soaring. Forgotten was his prolonged misery. He even ignored his dislike of his elongated client. Mr. Slappey's voice became sharp and incisive.

"How much I git fo' this job, Mistuh Mapes?"

"Git me back that stuff, an' I give you a reward of one hund'ed dollars. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," said Mr. Slappey, hoping that he didn't look too pleased. "Now, s'pose you leave me have all the details."

Neuritis Mapes talked long and earnestly, but Florian didn't bother to listen. He wasn't interested in clues and descriptions and things like that. He needed no information beyond what was already in the locked drawer of his filing cabinet.

"How long you reckon it'll take you to solve this case an' git me back my joolry, Mistuh Slappey?"

Florian said thoughtfully, "Well, an ordinary run-of-the-mill private eye would take 'bout a week, Mistuh

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Mapes. But a feller like me . . . well, I don't see why I shoul'n't have this cleaned up in twenty-four hours."

Mr. Mapes was skeptical, but then he didn't know all that Florian knew. He repeated that he cared nothing whatever about having the culprit arrested, or even of knowing his identity. He wanted his property.

The ensuing twenty-four hours dragged. Florian was his customary chipper, optimistic, debonair self. At 11 the following morning he telephoned Neuritis Mapes.

Pending his arrival, Mr. Slappey spread out on the desk all the jewelry he had borrowed from Neuritis in the first place and then taken a second time from Mr. and Mrs. Gus Trout. As an afterthought, he unclasped his own wrist watch and mixed it in with the other pieces.

Mr. Mapes breezed into the office and stared unbelievingly at the treasure on Florian's desk. "You is a wizzid," he exclaimed. "Heah's the hund'ed dollars I promised you."

Florian took the hundred, but told Neuritis to keep his hands off the jewelry.

"All yo' stuff is heah," he stated. "But I got other loot mixed up with it. I want you to pick out just what joolry belongs to you."

"Okay." Plainly, Mr. Mapes was tempted. Finally he reached out and picked up a wrist watch. Florian's own wrist watch. "This is mine," he said.

"Halt!" Mr. Slappey's voice crackled. "That ain't yours, an' you know it. An' the ve'y next move you make to seleck somethin' that don't belong to you, Ise goin' to call the law."

Mr. Mapes, properly squelched and highly impressed, proceeded with meticulous care. Piece by piece, he selected the articles which had been stolen from him. He thanked Florian, and then departed.

Mr. Slappey gazed raptly at his desk-top. Remaining thereon were two watches (one of them his), three bracelets, two pairs of earrings and an exceedingly handsome clip.

This was indeed the payoff. One hundred dollars from Gus Trout, another hundred from Neuritis Mapes — and now an additional reward.

He knew what had happened. Obviously, Gus and Verna Trout had mixed their own personal jewelry in with what they had gotten from Mr. Mapes, and Florian not knowing that — had merely swept all the loot into his own pocket. It was fantastically wonderful. He summoned Rosabel Johnson, pointed proudly to the stuff on his desk and invited her to select one piece for herself.

Miss Johnson was thrilled. "You is a genius, Mistuh Slappey," she said.

"Reckon I is, at that," he said. "You know, Rosabel, it just hits me all of a sudden that I is more than just a private eye. I ought to git myse'f another title."

"Yeh. What you aimin' to call yo'-se'f?"

"Fum now on," said Florian, "you better call me Bifocal. Bifocal Slappey."

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We take the liberty of quoting Howard Haycraft, the world's foremost historian of the detective story, on Melville Davisson Post and his greatest criminological character, Uncle Abner: as a writer, Mr. Post was "head and shoulders above his contemporaries and . . . the peer of almost any practitioner of the genre who has written since"; as to Uncle Abner, "no reader can call himself a connoisseur who does not know Uncle Abner forward and backward."

But in order to know Uncle Abner forward and backward, it is necessary for you to read the three "new" stories discovered by EQMM — three stories that have not been in print for more than 25 years and were not included in the only volume of Uncle Abner shorts ever published. We brought you "The God of the Hills" in our June 1953 issue; now we offer "The Devil's Track"; and the third tale, "The Dark Night," will appear in the near future.

THE DEVIL'S TRACK

by MELVILLE DAVISSON POST

IT WAS A TRIVIAL MATTER THAT TOOK my Uncle Abner onto the Dillworth lands.

He could not have had an inkling of the tragedy that he rode into.

He used to illustrate this mystery in events with example cases from the Scriptures. One never knew what lay ahead. If he rose up early to his task about the fields he might come upon the Ancient Enemy with his bag of tares sowing the land that he was going down to till.

We could not foresee the activities of the Evil One.

In peace about the duties of the commonplace, a man might come at any moment on the evidences of his tragic work. Under the quiet of his roof and in the serenity of the fields one forgot the inexplicable free hand of the Devil.

It was written in the second chapter of the Book of Job:

From whence comest thou?
And Satan answered the Lord, and said,
From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.

He did go to and fro in the earth, and sometimes one came on his track and the appalling evidences of destruction where he had walked. One always found some human wreckage about the place.

Abner never undertook to explain this mysterious freedom. But it was

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clear to him that the dominion of the King of Kings did not exclude the ravages of this marauder. The Devil was no cowardly spirit slipping in covertly in the dark and lying-by hidden in the day, and by insidious indirection pulling down what God built up. He destroyed and ruined, swaggering in his stride across the earth.

And in that work he was open and unafraid.

Had he not with a brazen effrontery unequaled gone in with the sons of God when they came to present themselves before the Lord . . . to present himself? And he had answered in that High Presence with an ironic impudence that staggered the human mind.

He took his freedom with this new world that the Lord had created for His pleasure.

He walked, as he liked, up and down in it.

And it was on this morning of early April that my Uncle Abner came upon his track.

It was the matter of a line fence that took my uncle to the Dillworth lands. A portion of the old rail fence that made the line would no longer turn the cattle. The chestnut rails had rotted, the fence had been repaired on occasion, but the time had arrived when it must be rebuilt.

My uncle had spoken more than once with Dillworth, but he could not be brought to help rebuild the fence.

He said that the fence was not on the line; he had discovered the position of the ancient corners; the fence should be moved back some distance on my uncle's side.

This was a common pretension where one wished to contend with his neighbor about a line.

The fact was that no line of a survey in this western portion of Virginia could be accurately established. The early surveys, at best, had been carelessly run. The hickory and the oak marked for corners, with three chips taken out with an ax, had been felled by the pioneer or rotted down, or been uprooted by the wind. And the county surveyors that followed had completed the confusion.

It was one of these uncertain lines that had now come into dispute between Dillworth and my Uncle Abner.

It was a morning, as I have said, of early April.

The rail fences glistened in the frost. The roads were hard and dry, the fields green as with a close-napped velvet cloth tacked smoothly over them.

Abner entered the Dillworth lands where they extended to the highway.

There was no gate, but the split-rail fence could be anywhere laid down for a horse to cross. He had no hope of bringing Dillworth to an agreement on the matter; and so he intended to go on to Randolph to give Dillworth a legal notice.

Randolph was the justice of the peace and his lands adjoined.

It was a country of little hills and

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narrow well-sodded valleys, lying westward from the great slope of the Alleghanies, toward the Ohio. It was an old cattle country, long cleared and fenced; held for the most part in great tracts that passed down in families and did not change. The wooded ridges were not cut out and the sodded valleys were rarely broken by the plow.

My Uncle Abner ascended the first hill, crossed its summit, and disappeared into the valley beyond.

It was an hour before he came out onto the second hilltop beyond this valley.

The summit of the farther hill had a fringe of wood along its ridge. My uncle stopped behind the screen of this wood, got down from his horse and moved carefully forward among the trees. The whole aspect and bearing of the man had changed. He had ridden into the Dillworth lands at his leisure and with no concern. In ten minutes his great chestnut horse should have covered the distance from the first hilltop to the second.

And yet that journey had occupied an hour.

And Abner had passed from unconcern at the trivialities of life to the tension of its tragedies.

That tension was everywhere in the features and actions of the man.

He moved with caution into the line of timber, leaving the great horse a little below the summit, covered, out of view. The horse remained, unmoving, a cast in bronze, flooded with the morning sun, as though it were a pagan idol at the approaches to a sacred grove.

Within an hour, in the crossing of a valley, from one hilltop to another, the purpose, the activities, the whole aspect of the man had changed.

In the seclusion of that hidden valley my Uncle Abner had come on the Devil's track!

He entered the woods and stood for some time searching the second valley beyond the ridge, while he remained himself hidden. Then he returned to his horse and, keeping under cover of the hilltop, made a long detour to the east entirely along the whole range of the hill.

He descended with its slope and entered the second valley as though he had come into the Dillworth lands directly from the Randolph estate on one of the cattle paths winding through the hollows.

He came out of a growth of beech trees into his second valley.

He found Dillworth here separating some bullocks, his horse tied to an oak tree.

The man, overcome with greed, had built his pens and set up his cattle scales in this valley, precisely between the two great grazing boundaries that he possessed. It was a precaution out of avarice. With his cattle scales built here, he could weigh the bullock out of its bed and so avoid the loss from drift that other men suffered from driving their cattle out to weigh them on the road. He was now in his cattle pens, on foot, with a club in his hand,

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picking out some bullocks and forcing them through a gate into another pen.

He was a big man with a heavy face, little shifty eyes and a stolid countenance.

One looking up at him as he passed would have read him incorrectly. He was far from stupid. He was a good judge of cattle. He had a gambler's instinct, a brutal courage that could not be turned aside, and, in the intricacies of a financial matter, he found always some way to his own advantage.

He had, too, a pagan worship of the land.

He would have gone to crucifixion to extend his acres.

He was in debt for the great boundary where he now stood, extending south to my uncle's line, and he had taken a gambler's chance to pay it. As it happened, the running of events was agreeable to his hazard. He had bought up herds of cattle in the hills and now the market had advanced.

He had a silent partner in these transactions, but even with a division of gain he would by this stroke of fortune split his debt in two.

If he had struck out for himself he would have cleared the land. But he was not altogether trusted and his contracts required the buttress of a better name. He was close-mouthed in these affairs and few persons knew the extent of his partner's interest; and those like Abner were not certain.

My uncle got down by the oak and looked over Dillworth's horse, its head, shape of its limbs and its feet.

"You ride a horse taken up from pasture," he said.

The man in the cattle pens went on with his work; he knew the mission on which Abner came, and it did not please him.

"Yes, and before he goes on the road he must be taken to the shop."

That term in the hills meant always the shop of a blacksmith. It had no other meaning.

"It's a good young horse," continued my uncle, "but it is nervous. It has been badly broken."

Dillsworth paused a moment in the cattle pens.

"I break them to my will," he said. "When I take an animal in hand I put it in fear of me. It is my way, Abner."

"It is one way," replied my uncle, "but it is not the best way. An animal can be controlled by fear. But it is the last measure to be taken with it. We forget their kindly instinct. A horse, in nearly every instance, will try to do the very best that he can understand. If we take a little patience with him he will invariably reward that patience."

He walked slowly from the oak over the carpet of green sod in the direction of the cattle pens, his hands behind him, his face lifted.

"And there is another reason, Dillworth," he went on. "You will find it written in the Scriptures. 'A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast.' "

Dillworth struck the bullock before him with the club.

"I waste no time on the Scriptures," he muttered.

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"But would it have been wasted, Dillworth?" replied my uncle. "I think you would have made a gain of something more than time if you had read the fourth chapter of the Book of Genesis. . . . Do you know that chapter?"

"I do not," replied the man. "But I know the thing that brings you to me, Abner. And it is an idle mission. I will not lay down a rail until the line is set back to the corners."

My uncle stopped sharp in his stride.

"I had forgotten about the fence," he said.

Dillworth closed the gate after the steer; then he turned on Abner.

"Forgotten about the fence!" he echoed. "Then what is the damned business that you are on?"

My uncle made a strange gesture.

"Why, sir," he said, "you have got the very word. . . . 'Damned,' Dillworth, is the word."

The man did not reply. He went on with his work. He was selecting a few thin cattle to take up and feed a little grain. The beef steer in this land was not corn fattened. The herds were turned out to pasture in the early spring. The rich blue grass put on weight. The sod was fed with lime leached out by the rain from the thick stratum that lay along the summit of the hills.

The bullock turned out on such pasture would wax fat, as though he were grain fed.

It would take about five acres to the steer, but with that range in these sodded fields he would put on 300 pounds and be fat for market at the middle of the summer.

But sometimes in the spring, as here with Dillworth, a few thin steers that had not come well through the winter would be taken out of the herd and fed a little grain.

There was not much substance in the first grasses.

And it was a custom to help the thin steer over these first weeks of turning out to grass. Corn on the cob was crushed and fed, a gallon to the bullock, poured out in a heap for him on some dry spot of the pasture. But for this additional feeding the thin cattle had to be taken out and kept in some small field apart from the herd.

It was a common custom that Dillworth was concerned with on this April morning.

But he was handling his cattle in a brutal manner, the club in his hand and his harsh voice cursing at the natural effort of the bullock to resist a separation from his fellows. He tramped about his pens while Abner remained standing in the field outside.

My uncle's face was grave and he was fallen into some deep reflection, but he seemed now to come to a conclusion, a plan to follow.

"Dillworth," he said, "the rod of land along a disputed line is no thing to kill for or to burn a roof. I would avoid a quarrel with you. But this fence will no longer separate our cattle, and something must be done."

Dillworth closed the gate on his last bullock and came out of the pens.

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He set his club down against the plank fence, tested the iron hook in the staple and came on toward my uncle. These acts, primitive and of no consequence in themselves, seemed to restore the man's composure.

"Now, Abner," he said, "you talk in reason, and I can understand you. But when you come at me in the dark with big threatening words I can only answer you in kind.

"I wish to settle this line matter with you, but I will not be robbed in the transaction. I have discovered the correct position of the corners."

"And how have you discovered them?"

The man did not reply directly. He began at a distant angle.

"Well, Abner," he said, "you know how the line of the present fence between us was determined. Old Haymond laid it out. Stewart, from whom I bought, and Monroe, from whom your father bought, could not agree, and so they sent for this county surveyor to run the line. The deeds they held called for a poplar at the north and chestnut oak at the south. But these trees were no longer standing.

"Stewart said that Monroe's Negroes had cut the poplar in the night to get a coon out, and that bee hunters had felled the chestnut oak, and to establish the line they must find the stumps. Monroe held in reply that the whole survey of the region had been pushed west and that to make the line conformable to the plats at Richmond it must be moved back on Stewart. The thing was leading to bad blood, and so they sent for old Haymond with his compass. But what could old Haymond, or for that, the best surveyor to the Crown, do in such a case without the corners?

"And he did the worst thing. He prayed and read the Bible and talked sanctimoniously of good will, and kindly feeling, and the love of God, and so got Monroe and Stewart to agree and build the fence.

"That settled nothing, Abner. It only served to send the disputed question on to us."

He stopped and, bending over, wiped his hands on the sod to remove the sweat. And in that posture, his head down near the earth, my uncle suddenly cried out to him:

"Do you hear a voice, Dillworth?"

The man stood up and looked about him.

"Why, no, Abner," he said. "What voice?"

My uncle repeated a strange gesture.

"I had forgotten, Dillworth," he said, "that you do not read the Scriptures. It is all written in that fourth chapter of the Book of Genesis."

Then he turned about.

"But here is your man Twiggs come to help you drive your cattle in. If you please, I would like to send him with a note to Randolph. If we are to settle this thing between us there should be a witness and the agreement should be written out in legal form and acknowledged before a justice."

Twiggs, riding a farm horse, had come in from the direction of Dill-

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worth's house and he was now approaching.

Dillworth turned toward him. He did not understand what Abner meant and imagined his Scriptural imagery of language related to the approach of Twiggs. He took also Abner's suggestion to indicate that he would agree to some modification of the line. This was the gain he sought.

He held out only for some sort of compromise that would add a little to his lands. He was quite willing to send Twiggs on such a mission.

Randolph's house was distant no farther than a mile through the fields, and the cattle in the pens could profitably wait if by that brief delay he could gain a rod of land, made legal by an agreement that could be entered of record in the office of the clerk of the county court.

He called Twiggs in and directed him to carry my uncle's message. Abner tore a page out of a notebook, wrote a few lines on it, in pencil and folded it. He handed it up to Twiggs, charging him to give it only into Randolph's hand, and so sent the man riding on his journey.

Twiggs could not read, and for that reason Abner knew that the contents of the note was safe from him. If he could have read it he would have been appalled. For my uncle had written:

> I have found the Devil's track in Dillworth's hollow. Come in with your men.

But in the serenity of his ignorance he rode away, a little man in big jean breeches rolled up to his boot tops and a jacket of the same material buttoned around his middle. He trotted down the valley, through the grove of beech trees, on his way to Randolph . . . on his way to the fatality that bears the name of a god!

There was the dry butt of a locust lying near where Abner stood. It had been intended for a gatepost, but it was hollow when cut into and so had been abandoned. Dillworth came over and sat down on this log. His temper had returned to its stolid equanimity. There is this essential quality in every dull-witted man — a dread of what he does not understand. The alarm about him is more fearful than in other men when an object moves toward him out of some obscurity. He draws back from it and, when he must, he approaches it with a considerably greater caution.

Abner had thus thrown him into fear by expressions that he could not follow and his grave concern had put his temper up. He understood now the whole drift of the affair and in the relief of it he turned genial. He bade my uncle sit down beside him, got out his pocketbook and searched for something in it.

He opened one or two folded papers in his search.

My uncle watched him sharply out of the corner of his eye, and one of these folded papers that Dillworth quickly hid behind another he particularly noticed. It was only for a moment, for the fraction of a moment,

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that the paper opened in Dillworth's fingers, but in that fated instant Abner saw the writing and the name set on it.

It was a piece of foolscap, ruled with blue lines and folded together. It was soiled and the edges along the folds were worn as though it had been carried a long time among the papers of the pocketbook, either by Dillworth or another.

Then he came upon the thing he sought — a little plat made in red ink on a piece of parchment such as the old land warrants issued by the governors of Virginia were accustomed to be inscribed on.

"Here, Abner," he said, "is the survey of my lands, as I bought from Stewart. You will see that the line between us is a straight line. But the present corners are two rods east. That is to say, two rods over on my land. The fool compromise that old Haymond ran robbed Stewart of two rods along the whole length of that line. It must have been that in this frolic of good will Stewart was drunk with liquor. No man in the calm possession of his mind would have agreed to a thing like that."

He paused and leaned a little toward my uncle. His voice descended into a lower note.

"And I will tell you, Abner, a further circumstance that you do not know. Before he died old Stewart told me that the agreed line was a fraud. And he told me where to find the corners."

My uncle spoke then, looking out before him.

"A dead man!" he said.

Dillworth turned a little.

"Why, yes," he said, "Stewart is a dead man. But is that any reason that the information he gave me is a lie?" He put the fingers of his hands together and added with a sanctimonious air:

"The dead do not lie."

"They do not," replied my uncle. "It is the living who lie."

"Then, Abner," continued Dillworth, as if his end was accomplished, "we will set back the line when Randolph rides in to write the paper."

And my uncle answered him, looking out across the fields.

"There may be, then," he said, "the evidence of another dead man to consider."

Dillworth turned sharply toward him. In his concern about his acres he took these words to mean that my uncle would counter with some equal story attributed to the deceased Monroe.

"What dead man, Abner? Have you also some testimony of a dead man?"

"I have," replied my uncle. "And I know now that this information is correct. You have said it, Dillworth — the dead do not lie!"

The cunning in Dillworth moved him to edge out of this corner.

"It's just an old saying," he muttered. "Old sayings are not always true."

And the reply surprised him.

"You are right, Dillworth," said my uncle. "The old sayings are not always

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true. Sometimes they are made up out of the very stuff of error. Take for example the old saying: 'Dead men tell no tales.' It is old, Dillworth, but it is wholly and profoundly false."

He struck his big knee with his clenched hand.

"And there is no way to stop them. The mouth of the living can be closed by fear or the hope of gain. We can reach the living, but how can we reach the dead?

"Men fancy that there is security in silence. But in silence there is no security. Men may lie, but circumstances cannot."

"Well," said Dillworth, "I know Stewart did not lie about this line. I don't know what Monroe told you."

"Monroe told me nothing," Abner replied. "I was thinking of another dead man."

"Was it Haymond, then? He was gone to the grave before you were old enough to remember."

My uncle answered in his deep, level voice:

"It was no dead man from his grave!"

He arose and walked over to the cattle pens.

"The price of cattle has advanced," he said.

Dillworth caught at that, for it was on ground he knew.

"A dollar a hundred, Abner."

"You have contracted for a thousand cattle," continued my uncle. "You should make a good deal of money, Dillworth, if you do not have to divide it with a partner."

The man remained seated on the log.

"Well," he said, "as it happens I won't have to divide it with a partner."

My uncle turned sharply on his heels.

"As what happens?"

Dillworth shifted his position.

"It was this way, Abner. I took Marsh in when I went out last fall to buy these cattle. I thought they would make some money. We had been partners once in a while in trades, and I thought it was only fair to give him the chance to come in with me. He was mealy-mouthed about it. And I went ahead with the understanding that he could have an interest if he wanted it. A little later, when the market got uncertain, he told me that he didn't want an interest in the cattle I had contracted. That ended it. I went ahead on my own hook.

"But this spring, when the market went up, he wanted me to take him in again. He was here the other day and said he would come back to see me about it. But I told him it was no use to come back. A man can't blow hot and cold with me, Abner. He stays in or he goes out."

He stood up then, as though his slow-moving mind had come to a decision.

"I look for him to come in here today."

And he jerked his head in a sort of gesture toward the hill from which my uncle had first looked down at him.

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Abner extended his arm toward the hill and the valley beyond it.

"Over there," he said. "Why would Marsh expect to find you over there?"

The gesture of the head in Dillworth had been unconscious.

"Well," he said, "I don't mean any particular place. I told Marsh that I was coming into this boundary today to get out these thin steers. He might ride anywhere over it to look for me."

Then he added:

"As it happened, the cattle were all on this end of the boundary and I have not crossed the hill. I found them in this valley in their beds about the scales here. I have been here all morning."

Abner did not reply.

He walked around the pens and through the cattle and about the valley, as though he idled, waiting until Randolph should arrive. He had taken up the club that Dillworth had set down beside the gate. It was a section of a dogwood sapling some four feet in length and whittled round at one end as though intended to fit into a hole — the hole of a two-inch auger.

When he spoke he went back to the matter of the partnership which Dillworth had explained.

"If there was no writing between you and Marsh," he said, "there is no legal evidence of any partnership. It would be merely then the question of whose word is taken . . . if Marsh should go before a judge."

"Marsh will not go before a judge," said Dillworth.

My uncle looked out at the hills. Again he spoke in his level voice:

"Perhaps he has already gone before a Judge."

My uncle did not look toward Dillworth. He walked about. He came now to the tree by Dillworth's horse. He stopped by the limb to which the animal was tied and suddenly spoke to Dillworth, extending his arm up the valley.

"Is that far steer lame?" he asked. "Or is it only the roll in his walk?"

Dillworth turned to look in the direction of the bullock, and in the moment that his head was turned Abner made a gesture as though to strike the young horse.

The startled horse went back on his haunches, doubling the limb.

Dillworth turned at the sound.

"This is a dangerous horse," said Abner.

"He's a tame horse," replied Dillworth. "You must have scared him."

"Is there any tame horse?" continued Abner as in reflection. "Do not the Scriptures tell us that a horse is a vain thing for safety? And is it not the common experience of man that a horse may be quiet under him for years and then, with no warning, at some inconsequential thing rear and throw him?"

Dillworth stopped. The words seemed to suggest something to him.

"Why, yes, Abner," he said, "that's the truth. I used to tell Marsh that. You know the horse he rides. It seems tame enough. But I have seen that

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horse shy at a shadow or a wisp of ragweed in a field, and whirl like a whiplash.

"I told Marsh that his horse would kill him some day. And he will kill him, Abner. As you have said, is there any tame horse?

"Take your own horse, Abner. You think you know him, but how can you tell what he might do if he were startled?"

The horse was a friend and a brother to my uncle. He would go without his dinner, but this horse was fed. He would go without a cup of water, but this horse drank, and wherever he might be this horse was bedded before he slept. It was a greater wonder then that he made this hostile gesture at Dillworth's horse.

"Let us ride out," he said. "Perhaps we shall find Randolph coming in."

He got into the saddle, and the two of them rode east.

As they rode my uncle talked.

By the indirectness of this talk he came to Dillworth's form of contract with the grazers. There would be no writing, for such purchases were verbal, and one's word held.

Once given, it was sacred. No cattleman in these hills went back on his word if he were a person of any substance.

What Abner drove at was to find if Dillworth had brought Marsh's name into these transactions. And under the subtleties of Abner's indirections the facts came out. Dillworth had made the contracts in the autumn in his own name, but with the assurance added that Marsh was a partner in the purchase.

"You see, Abner," he said, "Marsh fooled me. I thought he was going in with me, so I told everybody that he was a partner, and I so considered him at the time. Then when he backed out on me I took the contracts over myself."

They came out of the little wood into a larger open valley that led eastward to the highway. The contour of the land formed here the apex of an angle. The first valley which my uncle had entered along on this April morning also came out here. The little rivulets from the two valleys joining at this point made the larger stream that flowed eastward toward the river.

Abner turned his horse into this farther valley.

"Randolph has not yet come," he said. "Let us ride in and look at this line fence."

"We had better wait for Randolph," Dillworth said.

My uncle did not pull up his horse. He rode on.

"Why wait?" he said. "Randolph will come in, and if Marsh is looking for you through the boundary we may find him."

There came, for a moment, a dreadful indecision into Dillworth's face.

Then he made his resolution and rode in.

They rode over the carpet of beech leaves, silent. My uncle carried the club that he had picked up at the cat-

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tle pen where Dillworth had set it down. They came out into the pasture land beyond the wood and my uncle stopped beside a sled under a tree at the border of the wood.

"You are not careful of your implements, Dillworth," he said. "This sled will rot in the wet summer months."

"It's an old sled," replied Dillworth. "The runners are worn out."

But my uncle remained a moment by the sled, and behind the man as though to verify his theory. Three dogwood standards only were on the sled. The fourth auger hole of the sled frame was empty.

He overtook Dillworth in the next moment.

Suddenly the man beside Abner stopped and pointed toward the rise of the hill.

"There's Marsh's horse," he said. "Now I wonder what has happened."

My uncle looked in the direction at the big gray horse, cropping the grass, the rein under its feet, the saddle empty.

"What could have happened?" replied my uncle. "Marsh has got down to await your coming, Dillworth, and turned loose the horse."

The man swung about in his saddle.

"No," he said, "the thing I have feared for Marsh has happened. That horse has thrown him and he is dead."

The prediction was too true.

They came presently to Marsh lying on the earth, his arm doubled under him. They got down and hurried to the body, but it was clear that the man was dead.

Dillworth made a great gesture, flinging out his hands.

"Good God!" he cried. "What an awful accident!"

My uncle stood looking down at Marsh. He made no exclamation of surprise.

"Accident!" he echoed.

"Why, yes, Abner," Dillworth hurried on, "the very accident against which I have so often warned him."

Dillworth went on as though emotion overcame him.

"Damn the horse," he cried. "If I had a rifle I would shoot it."

"Shoot the horse?"

"Yes!" Dillworth roared. "Shoot the horse! He has killed Marsh and he should not live on to kill another!"

"Well, Dillworth," Uncle Abner said, "the horse cannot speak to deny your charge of murder, and someone ought to speak for him. Let us see what defense the horse could make.

"You will notice, Dillworth, that the injury from which Marsh died is on the top of his head — across the top of his head — and there is a deep, ragged incision in the skull at this point. It is not a general crushing fracture of the skull. It is a sharp narrow fracture, breaking through the bone. The sod could not make that fracture."

"It was a stone!" said Dillworth. "Marsh's head struck on a stone."

"I thought of that," replied my uncle. "But if you will look closely about this portion of the pasture you will see it is free of stones. There is not a stone to be found anywhere around Marsh.

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"And in addition to this, if the horse could speak he could present further evidence. He could point out that there has been another horse here."

"How?" said Dillworth. "There is no track."

"Not here," replied my uncle, "but walk with me." And he went with Dillworth to the rivulet. "There," he said, pointing to the stream, "is a clear footprint stamped in the wet earth."

"And what of this, Abner?" he said. "Marsh's horse has perhaps crossed here at this grazing."

"Why, no," replied my uncle. "The horse would also clear himself of this. He would say, 'Your Honor, when I was in that pasture I had an iron shoe on every foot, and it was a barefoot horse that has made this print.' And he would speak the truth, Dillworth."

"If it is not the track of Marsh's horse," he muttered, "then it may be the track of the Devil, for all I know." Abner answered him:

"You name the authority correctly," he said. "The Devil has walked here. But not alone. There was another with the Devil to do his work . . . and I know the man!"

"Then, Abner," he said, "you know more than I know. I was not here."

"Dillworth," replied my uncle, "if you find a man falsifying the details of a thing, will you believe his conclusion on it? Four times on this morning I have taken you in a lie. You said Marsh's horse was vicious, and it is the tamest horse in the hills. You said that you found your cattle sleeping by the scales. I looked closely and there was not a bed about them. You said there was no written contract between you and Marsh, and yet when you opened your pocketbook to find the land plat, I saw the paper with your names. You said you were not in this valley, and here is the track of your horse, for I examined his feet by the oak tree and he is barefoot.

"Dillworth," he said, "you are a thief and an assassin and a liar!

"There was a profit in this partnership and you wanted the whole gain for yourself . . . so you killed Marsh and stole away the paper that would be evidence against you.

"And you carried the very implement of this murder in your hand. Look at it, Dillworth. It is a standard from that sled yonder. Like the three others, it is a piece of dogwood. The whittled end of it fits the auger hole in the frame."

He cast the dogwood standard of the sled down before the man.

And at the gesture the primordial brute in Dillworth overcame him. He darted forward and seized the club.

". . . and I will kill you too!"

But the sound of horses stopped him in his murderous intent.

Randolph and his men were entering the valley.

From whence comest thou?

And Satan answered the Lord, and said,

From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.

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A WINNER IN EQMM'S PRIZE CONTEST

ALL DAY SUNDAY

by BEN RAY REDMAN

THE NOISE FROM THE SWIMMING pool came through the window of the dressing-room, where Anne was refreshing her make-up in front of Laura's mirror. Anne knew from the loud splashes that Tony was giving his usual exhibition of comic diving; and the squeals could be only Sarah's. She was always her husband's best audience.

Anne patted on a little rouge.

It wasn't a large party for Hollywood, but it was a good party, just right, the kind that Laura always gave. She had the trick. "All Day Sunday" her invitations read, and they meant just that — if you believed in a Sunday that began a little after noon and ended any time between midnight and the following morning. You came when you chose and left when you pleased. Sometimes less than twenty guests showed up, sometimes more than 50. Laura never knew how many there would be, but she was always ready for the new faces that lent variety to the weekly gatherings, and for the old ones that gave them a core of comfortable familiarity. As a hostess she was effortless. There was always the pool, during warm weather, and tennis and badminton and ping-pong; the best food in the world, and a bottomless bar.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, we shall have two complete back somersaults with a glass in each hand!" It was Tony's voice; Sarah's squeal would follow on cue.

Anne dusted on powder.

She had been coming to Laura's All Day Sundays for almost six months now, ever since she had played a bit in one of Laura's starring vehicles. But she wondered how much longer she would be coming, or going anywhere; for that part had been her first and, to date, her last part in pictures. If Dan Gordon hadn't driven his car off the top of Lookout Mountain, things might have been different. Dan had sworn that he believed in her, and at least he had given her the one job. But all the other casting directors in town seemed to be busy believing in other people, and Anne was getting dangerously close to the point where she wouldn't be able to believe in herself any longer.

Nice powder of Laura's, she thought.

She was also rapidly reaching several other points; among them, the point at which she couldn't go on paying rent, and the point at which there would be no money for food.

Anne tilted her chin and looked at herself in the mirror. It was a pretty chin, and the chin was part of a pretty

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face — only four years ago it had been the prettiest face in her high school's senior class, in Newton, Iowa. There was nothing wrong with the figure either. Anne didn't have to stand up to be sure of that. Nor did she need anyone to tell her that she had talent. All she needed was a chance to prove it. But that was what they had all said, what they had all thought once — the pretty girls that you saw car-hopping at the drive-in restaurants, ushering in theatres, making change in the Five-and-Ten.

Picking up the hand-mirror, she turned to study her profile.

But the others being wrong did not prove that she was. And when she asked for a chance she didn't mean something like that tiny bit she had played. No one could have done anything with that. She meant a real chance. If she could only hang on long enough, she was sure to get it. If she could only hang on in Hollywood for a few months more!

She decided she needed a touch of mascara. Where did Laura keep her mascara, anyway? When she opened the drawer, she saw the pin.

It was a very nice pin, platinum and diamonds. She had seen Laura wear it often. But when Laura wasn't wearing it, it should be in her jewel-box, and the jewel-box should be in the wall-safe. Laura shouldn't leave things like that lying around. Anne had no idea what it was worth, but she knew that it must be a lot. She would tell Laura she ought to put it away. Then, as if her hands were obeying an impulse over which she had no rational control, Anne realized that she was picking up the pin and swiftly fastening it underneath her own blouse.

She did not enjoy the rest of the party. The one thing she wished to do was to get away as quickly as possible from the big house and all those laughing, chattering people; but she didn't dare to leave earlier than usual. She drank more than she had meant to, and she was one of the last to kiss Laura good night.

"Next Sunday, darling, of course," said Laura.

"Thank you so much, darling," said Anne. "It was a perfectly marvelous day. I'll see you next Sunday, of course."

When she got back to her one-room apartment, she undid the pin and put it on the table beside her bed and looked at it and cried. She was a long time getting to sleep, but she was asleep at 10:30 the next morning when the phone rang.

"That you, kid?" said Abe Berman. "Grab a taxi and meet me over at Super at the information desk in half an hour. It's something hot this time. They're stuck for a dumb ingenue and are all ready to roll. Corny Klein's producing, Joe Hilton's the director. I told you I was going to dig up something good. Sure I know what I'm talking about. Haven't I been working on this thing for two weeks? Put on the snappiest dress you got. They want a dumb dame, but pretty. Step on it, see?"

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Anne saw, and fastened the pin under her snappiest dress.

"She's the type," said Klein.

"Yeah," said Hilton. "Can she act?"

"Can she act? You're asking *me* that?" protested Anne's agent. "You should see her act!"

"How much does she get?" asked Klein.

"Wait outside while I talk business, honey, and I'll take you home in my car," said Abe expansively.

In five minutes he had joined her and was hustling her towards his pink sedan.

"There's a week in it for you," he said, "and you get 250. But did I have to sweat blood to get it for you! Not a cent less, I said. But did I have to go to bat for you! It was rugged, I'm telling you. What's the matter, kid? It's pretty swell, isn't it?"

"Sure it's swell, Abe," said Anne. "Sure." But to herself she was saying: I wish I could die.

"You're all set, baby," said Abe as he dropped her at her apartment.

I wish I could die! I wish I were dead!

A telegram was stuck in her mailbox, and she went upstairs holding the telegram in one hand and feeling the pin under her dress with her other hand. Inside her room, she opened the yellow envelope.

RETURN IT AND ALL IS FORGIVEN LOVE LAURA.

The tears came fast. She began to sob in deep, choking sobs. Her thoughts raced — I'm glad she knows, I'm glad she knows, oh, dear Lord, I'm glad, I'm glad! But how could she have known who took it, how could she tell? She must have known when she kissed me good night just the way she always does. She must have known. But how could she, how could she?

And at about the same time some 30 other persons were opening identical telegrams, reading them in bewilderment, wondering if it was Laura's idea of a joke, and — if it was meant to be a joke — what the point was supposed to be, anyway . . .

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Less than a month before EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest closed, we received the following letter, with manuscript attached:

THE POLICE STATION,
THORPE-LE-SOKEN,
CLACTON-ON-SEA,
ESSEX.

The Adjudicators
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
New York, U. S.

Dear Sirs:

I am a British police sergeant.

This story is my own unaided work, and I have been asked by Miss Margery Allingham, the novelist, to forward it for consideration.

Yours faithfully,

RALPH JONES

What detective-story editor in the world could resist such a letter? We read the manuscript that very day, and as one reader commented later, we were "quite gone on this story, especially considering its source." But real-life policeman or not, Mr. Jones can write. For all his down-to-earth background in the backwaters of crime, Sergeant Jones has a broad romantic streak in his heart. He is gifted with an instinctive knowledge of people — thus his characters come quickly to life; and he is gifted with an instinct for phrasing — thus his descriptions are often surprisingly sharp and illuminating. His story, "Murder at Chanticleer Hall," ranked high among the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest. It is precisely the kind of tale Americans have in mind when they refer to the "English-type detective story."

A profile of Sergeant Jones — called "Portrait of an Intellectual Dogberry" and written by Richard Lane (Maurice Richardson) — appeared some time ago in "Lilliput." Among many other fascinating revelations, it told some of the odd experiences Sergeant Jones has had in line of duty. For example, that strange affair in Braintree during the

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pea-picking season: one of the itinerant workers, known as Surgical Spirit Kelly (the sobriquet owed its origin to Kelly's peculiar drinking habits), "had an original method of resisting arrest: he unstrapped his wooden leg and very nearly rendered the Sergeant unconscious with it."

MURDER AT CHANTICLEER HALL

by RALPH JONES

"TO DETECTIVE-SUPERINTENDENT Grady. I beg to report — " rattled the typewriter. Then the telephone chirruped again. Detective-Sergeant Oliver lifted it with a sigh and halloed to his wife.

"Why, yes, dear," he said soothingly. "I'd clean forgotten it was my rest day. Yes, and the golf at Chanticleer Hall. . . . Must be slipping. I'll take you out when I get back. Yes, I promise — goodbye, Ruth."

Jim Oliver titivated his tie before the mirror that reflected a sharp, watchful face dressed in a pleased smile. It was decent of young Bertram to ask him over to golf with the pater, he reflected, locking his typewriter against nefarious colleagues. Lord Hickling might be a tough old driver in business and a duff old putter on the green, but he always mellowed at the nineteenth and he was the richest man in Wessex.

Oliver slung his clubs into the little car. Then he turned his beaky nose towards Wingfield and made for the road that fanned out like a twisted ribbon. Turning sharply away from Sheverel's High Street, he took a lingering look at the *Dolphin* and two miles later pulled up at the lodge gates. "And who the devil shut them?" he muttered as he set the handbrake. Then a frightened man ran out from the lodge.

"Thank Gawd you've come, sir," said the lodgekeeper. "I'll let 'ee in." He swung open the great gate and gibbered away with a face as white as a cheese. " 'Is Lordship's gorn, sir. Dead."

"What!" barked Oliver. "Dead? Why, he 'phoned me last night."

The man gave him a terrified nod and the dusty car rattled away down the drive. Oliver pulled up where the poplars stood like brooding sentries in the courtyard, and made his way to the library.

The little group broke up as he entered. Saggers, the gray-haired manservant, looked older than ever in grief, while a dainty parlormaid and an oafish pantry-boy hovered pop-eyed in the middle distance. The doctor broke off his conversation with young Hickling and nodded curtly to the sergeant. He was very noncommittal. "Eight hours, p'raps more," he grunted.

Lord Hickling wore an astonished

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look. He lay in a pool of blood with a dreadful wound in his side and a dagger touching his outstretched right hand. The young doctor nodded coolly at the crimson blade. "That's the weapon, all right," he said.

Oliver knelt down and gazed intently at the dead face. Then he straightened up and whispered softly to Dr. Connolly. "What?" said the doctor in his brassiest voice. "Yes, it looks like suicide. Tell the Coroner I'll do the autopsy if he likes. Goodbye, I've got a surgery waiting." Oliver turned to the kind, tired face of Bertram Hickling, and his handshake was firm and sympathetic.

The library's oak panels were almost covered with ancient weapons. Spears, broadswords, flintlocks, and trophies of the chase, all neatly documented. It was like a small armory. It seemed a safe bet they were not originally owned by the forebears of Lord Hickling, the pursy little man with the surprised air of having just won the Irish Sweepstakes and who played golf with a policeman. One weapon was missing from its place. A silent clock of exquisite workmanship watched the proceedings from a corner of the room. *Jno. Christian, Clockmaker*, was all it said.

Oliver held a whispered consultation with Bertram Hickling. Then he turned to the group of servants. "No one is to leave the building on any account," he said sharply. Then he got to work.

At mid-day he drove over to the morgue in a brown study.

It was devilish awkward, he decided over a pipe. The Superintendent away at a conference at Scotland Yard, the Inspector on leave, and a young sergeant holding the fort. For the third time he unwrapped the dagger, held it gingerly with his gloved hand, and compared it with the great gash in Hickling's side. The blade was wanting. He rewrapped it carefully and dialed the doctor.

"I wondered if you'd had any second thoughts, Doc," he said anxiously. "This suicide notion, it won't wash —"

"I'll do the P.M. in half an hour," said Dr. Connolly. "Wait for me. And my comments were intended for the bystanders."

"Ah, so you felt as I did, eh?"

"And I think our policemen are wonderful," said the doctor.

After the post-mortem, Oliver wandered down the narrow lane and walked into the *Griffin*. It was not his first visit. It was a shining little beerhouse with pewter tankards and a floor scrubbed white. He beat on the counter and called for a consolatory pint. It had been a sad business at the mortuary, he decided. His benefactor had kicked the bucket and left him stranded. "Goodbye, Inspector's cap!" he muttered. He drained his beer and then for the first time he noticed the old man in the window-seat.

"Did you speak, Dad?" he asked.

The little man cleared his throat. "Allus was a bad 'ouse, the Manor," he quavered. "I never liked it. Sorta spooky ole place. The last Squire

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Kirkwall was a gen'leman, they say, but they do say that one o' the young Squires was knifed there once. Murdered."

The sergeant's ears almost twitched. "Brown ale, gaffer?" he invited. "Now then," when the old fellow had lifted his tankard, "when was all this?"

Elias Gilder put down the empty and sighed happily. " 'Underds of years ago," he piped in broad Wessex. Oliver glared furiously at him for a moment. Then he called for the same again and the pair chatted happily for a while until the sergeant set off for the vicarage. He looked very thoughtful.

"Come in," said the Vicar with a broad smile.

The Rev. Francis Holliday was a muscular Christian with a face like a pippin. Round and red and shining. He had stroked Oxford not so many years ago. Like many a young man, he loved the old. Old writings, old churches, old inns, aye, and old ale, too. But best of all he loved a gossip. Tobacco smoke swirled in the book-lined study as he beamed at his visitor.

"The Kirkwalls?" he said. "They owned the place for centuries, yes, and thousands of acres besides. A very old family, indeed. Near the Blood Royal, in fact, but now extinct. They called it Foray Manor, and it's got a history bloody enough to match it."

He loosened his collar and grinned across at the sergeant. "Ye widn't be afther the Hicklings' history, wid ye?" he asked in a mock-Irish brogue.

"No, thanks," said Oliver quickly. "Elevated to the peerage for political services. Army contracts in two wars — no, thanks!" He looked thoughtfully at the Vicar. "What's this yarn about a knifing hundreds of years back?"

Francis Holliday stared in astonishment. "It's very odd," he said slowly. "You're the second man to ask that in a month." He unlocked a drawer in his bureau and took out a great sheet of parchment which he laid reverently on the table. He almost genuflected before it. It was old and tattered but it crackled bravely. The Vicar was still gazing inquiringly at his visitor. "It's just curiosity," said the sergeant at last. "My Superintendent thinks I'm mildly potty."

Detective-Superintendent Grady came back next day and was soon in conference with his subordinate.

"You've got a chill, Oliver," he said happily. "That and alcoholic poisoning. The doctor's evidence isn't conclusive, you know. It doesn't rule out suicide. What's that? All right, call him a pathologist if you must. It makes no difference." Grady looked like an elderly bloodhound. He was lean and thought-puckered, with a frosty smile that boded no good to a suspect.

The two men sat in the ill-fated library at Chanticleer Hall, *née* Foray Manor. Jim Oliver listened moodily to the Guv'nor's chaff while he stirred his tea with a crested spoon.

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"Have you got a cigarette about you?" asked the parsimonious Superintendent. Oliver fished out the Woodbines that he kept for such eventualities and his superior helped himself and got back to business with the foolscap. "Now then, how much do we know?" he said, scribbling industriously.

"Item one. Lord Hickling was found stabbed at 8 yesterday morning. Next, weapon presumably removed from case on library wall. Next, the pathologist's report says death was due to stab wounds that could have been self-inflicted. Dabs — fingerprints — on handle tally with the dead man's. . . ." The droning voice stopped. "Any comments, Sergeant?"

It was a neat enough *précis*, if not very imaginative. Oliver shook his head. "Background?" he said.

Superintendent Grady went back to his notes. "We know," he said, grinning cynically, "that your friend Lord Hickling's affairs were in a chaotic state. That the Hall's mortgaged up to the hilt, that even his pedigreed Jerseys aren't paid for. Right? So much for any cherished expectations," he concluded with a meaning look at the sergeant. But Oliver had his own thoughts.

"Motive?" he said quietly.

"Motives for suicide a-plenty," Superintendent Grady said smugly. "The pathologist won't contradict, and *we*'ll look after the verdict at the inquest. *Who's Who* speaks of his hobbies, model-farming and so on. Even those have failed, not to mention his latest wildcat scheme. The coal mine."

"What news of that, sir?" asked the sergeant, awake at last.

"I've done my own research," Grady said with pride. "The City writes it off as an abyss — as a dismal failure. He hoped to find a new seam on pasture land at Cwm-something or other, down in South Wales. Result, N.G. I'd say that was the gambler's last throw. There was only one way out. Satisfied?"

Oliver looked unconvinced. "Not quite, sir," he said bravely. "What about the old parish records? The Vicar was very helpful."

"Parish records my bottom!" said the Superintendent coarsely. "Old wives' tales, you mean." He fixed his hornrims, nevertheless, and studied the faded sheet beside the foolscap. "This is 1950ish crime, Oliver," he went on, "and you bring me a yarn of 1700. What's it all about, anyway? I can't fathom these pothooks."

"Latin, written with a quill," the sergeant said patiently, taking up the screed and the tale. "Chronicler unknown. It's a queer tale of a girl called Joanna, a sort of Sheverel Beauty Queen 'way back. Her father was a tradesman with a shop in London and one in the village here. . . ." He watched the broadening grin of one who held that history began the day he joined the Force, and continued:

"One day, the girl's father came

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to Sheverel and found his daughter *enceinte*. Young Squire Kirkwall was suspect. Sad set-up in those days — Squire's son and tradesman's daughter. And Joanna's Dad wasn't the type to name his price and send the girl away. He bearded the Kirkwalls, one thing led to another, and the varlets threw him over the drawbridge into the moat. He clambered out and blistered the Sheverel air with his threats."

Detective-Superintendent Grady stifled a yawn. "Wake me when you've finished," he said.

"Don't go away, sir," Oliver went on. "The Young Master was sent abroad on the Grand Tour until the hubbub died down. But he came back at last — and he brought a wife with him. Joanna was forgotten. There was great rejoicing among the Kirkwalls. Beer was cheap at the time," he said wistfully, "and the junketing went on for days. Then one morning a servant found him in the library — this library — dying from a sword thrust. Interested, sir?"

"Who was this tradesman, anyway?"

"John Christian, clockmaker, of Newgate Street," said Oliver. The expression on Grady's face stopped him suddenly. Then, in the stillness, Superintendent Grady recovered himself with a tremendous effort. "Shut that door," he said at last, very softly. "Now then, any more background noises?"

"I've done my own research, sir!" Oliver said pertly. "Our man was hard up, and as if that weren't enough, he was in the toils with a woman. Nell Savory, Forces' Favorite. They met in an Ensa party at Alamein and he fell for her like a stone. . . . She's a very *un*savory Nell, however. She's been bleeding him for months — blackmail. Dad, like other reformed rakes, wouldn't condone loose conduct. Goodbye, inheritance!"

"And Dad, I take it, is —?"

"Lord Hickling," said the sergeant. "Lord Hickling, that was. It might seem that Nell was killing the golden goose, but I suppose she knew her admirer was no longer interested. In any case, she wouldn't have been acceptable as the next Lady Hickling, eh? It seems she 'rested' at the Hall last month, after her arduous tours, and no doubt squeezed her man good and proper. You know the lady, sir?"

Grady looked a different kind of old dog when his eyes sparkled. "Do I!" he exclaimed. "The shapely Nell, eh? I saw her on TV last week. The missus don't like her, of course —" He looked around him with an eye that missed nothing. "Where's my cigarettes?" he asked.

Strategy was prepared at great length. It was a tedious process, involving deep thought, low cunning, and more foolscap. Saggers came in to light the lamps and found the two men still arguing fiercely over some obscure point. Then, at last, Grady looked at his watch and swore fervently. "Go and fetch him, Oliver," he said.

The sergeant stepped out onto

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the terrace. The blue night had fallen like a great hand over the battlements and blurred the beauty of the scene he knew so well. The Hall loomed stark and implacable against the night sky. Oliver knew a deep sense of foreboding as he stared up at the towering turrets that frowned down into the little valley. There was something primeval about the Hall. Something as old as Original Sin in its history of lust and treachery, greed and corruption. Yes, he remembered, and murder, too.

Oliver was fighting a battle in the silent night. At last he drew hard on his cigarette and pitched it over the terrace. He watched it fall like a tiny rocket until it reached the moat, where the black waters closed over it. "So be it," said Oliver. He turned swiftly and made his way to the West Wing to find his friend.

It was a war of attrition. An hour later the new Lord Hickling still retained his aplomb in the face of an onslaught that had been perfected for 30 years.

Opening with the old, old prescription of two parts bluff to one of cajolery, Detective-Superintendent Grady was forced to admit that this man took some breaking. He tapped Oliver's ankle and the sergeant took over the inquisition.

"Now, my lord —" He stopped at the raised eyebrow.

"Why the sudden formality? It was Bertram yesterday."

"Very well, sir — Bertram, you're wasting our time. We've evidence enough to crush you. Why not believe us?"

Lord Hickling sighed wearily. "If I weren't the soul of courtesy," he said gently, "I'd say *you* were the time-wasters. Why should I desire my father's death? What had I to gain from an estate beset by mortgage and without a hope of improvement?" Then, with an odd, twisted grin: "No doubt you know all this?"

"Saggers has told you I was in bed at 10," the new Lord Hickling went on calmly. "I've assured you I was asleep by half-past, at the farther end of two long corridors. Say, 40 yards away from the library where my father died at midnight. What then?" He paused and handed round the cigarettes. "Despite everything, let brotherly love continue! And why, Superintendent, choose such an ungodly hour to question me?"

"My lor —, Bertram," said Oliver. "This is your last chance to show a shred of decency. You couldn't wait, could you? And there was Miss Savory, the leech, to consider!"

A convulsive start showed the suspect's nerves were like fiddle strings. The sergeant went on: "There are times when I wish I had any other job. What about the wire from the Chief Engineer of your father's latest company? The one digging for coal in the wilderness, eh? 'Magnificent first results. Tremendous possibilities. Hold on. Dallas.' It arrived the morning he died, but your father never saw it, Bertram, because you saw it first!"

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He smoothed the crumpled form on the table and Hickling lost his coolness. "By what right d'you pry into my personal papers?" he said sharply. "I'll have you —"

"Bertram," said Oliver sadly.

But the Superintendent cut him short. "Empty that ashtray, sergeant," he said quickly. "It's overflowing. Now, Lord Hickling —"

The sergeant took the ashtray and walked unobserved to the fireplace. He tipped out the ashes and walking back, paused by the old clock. He opened it noiselessly, fumbled for a moment with the mechanism, and resumed his seat. The Superintendent's voice, booming like a dinner gong, drowned all lesser sounds until he paused and cleared his throat. Then a stiff, dry tick broke the silence. It was two minutes to midnight.

Grady leaned forward in his chair. With his white coif standing up like a foaming breaker, he watched his man with a cruel mouth and eyes like a stoat's as Hickling swung round with a white face and trembling lips.

"What's that you've done?" he screamed, waving demented hands. "Stop it! Stop it, I say! You fools, you don't know —"

"You're getting excited about a little matter," said the suave Grady. "And you didn't answer my last question. As I was saying —"

The old clock gave out a faint, whirring sound as its hands reached their apex. But no soft, mellow chime followed. A brassy, unbearable clamor filled the little room. *One!* With a mad cry that woke the sleeping village, Hickling forced his way past the two men. *Two!* He flung himself at the clock and wrenched open the case, when a great curved blade swept up and down and was gone in a twinkling.

The clockmaker had claimed his third victim.

A genial sun dappled the lawn at Police Headquarters. A daring sunbeam filtered into the frowzy office and pirouetted on Grady's great nose.

Jim Oliver glanced down at his typewriter again, but the Superintendent was loquacious that morning. "Homicide and suicide," he said thoughtfully. "All in two days, and another family extinct! That clockmaker was a clever old monkey, all right, but he wasn't no Christian. . . . He must have known when he fitted that bell that the young Squire would be handy, and that his first impulse would be to stop that devil's row. Lug open the door and release concealed spring. Then — presto!

"It's a queer thing," he said, "that the oldest inhabitant gave us the clue, eh? Strange that the old clock was dumped aside all those years. . . ."

Oliver began to type two-fingered. "What," the Guv'nor began again, "what was it young Hickling said as he lay beside the clock? 'You brute!' wasn't it? What did he mean?"

The sergeant looked up at last, with a face grown suddenly old. "*Et tu, Brute?*" he said heavily. "Meaning, 'You too, Jim Oliver?' "

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Black Mask Magazine . . .

WALK ACROSS MY GRAVE

by NORBERT DAVIS

IT IS NECESSARY TO UNDERSTAND at the start that Mrs. Frelich was a good woman. The phrase is meant to be taken just as it stands: without quotation marks, without any ironic emphasis.

She awoke when the wind changed direction and blew sharp and cold through the bedroom window. She squirmed under the covers and muttered in vague protest, but the wind riffled the stiff lace curtains, rattled the window shade, and then came and put a chill ghostly finger on the tip of Mrs. Frelich's nose.

"Oh, drat," she said drowsily.

She flipped the covers back and got up, tubbily shapeless in her thick gray flannel nightgown, and padded over to the window. Her eyes were sticky with sleep, and she probably would never have seen the figure outside at all if it hadn't been moving so erratically.

As it was, she stood rigidly with her arms raised and her fingers hooked over the bottom of the window sash. She stared, and all her sleepiness was whisked away in an instant.

The moon was wan and thin among hurrying storm clouds, and the iron picket fence that enclosed Oak Knoll Cemetery made a neat geometric shadow, black against the dingy gray of the half-melted snow drift that clung to its base. Behind the fence the tombstones stood in ragged ranks, fat and short and tall and spindly, as still as the death that was under them.

The black figure was running between the tombstones. Not running anywhere in particular and not running very fast. Weaving back and forth, spinning and dodging and swerving with a crazy fluid grace.

Mrs. Frelich's voice came cracked and thick out of her throat. "Abe! Abe!"

Bedsprings squeaked in her son's room. "Huh? What?"

"*Abe!*"

He bumped against the door. "Huh? What's the matter, Mom?"

"Look! The cemetery! Somebody — something —"

Abe stood beside her at the window, breathing noisily. The black figure below hit the iron picket fence and bounced away, whirling gracefully to keep its slack-kneed balance, but it tripped over a low headstone and went flat and squirming in a pile of snow.

Abe Frelich drew his breath in a gasp. "It's Dave! It's Dave Carson. He's drunk, that's what! He's drunk, and he thinks he's playin' football!"

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"You go get him," said Mrs. Frelich. "Make him stop. It's terrible he should be doing that in there."

The black figure was up and staggering.

"Oh, no!" said Abe. "I ain't gonna fool with him! Not Dave Carson! Not the banker's son! Oh, no!"

Mrs. Frelich clutched tight at a curtain and crumpled it. "Look. He ran right into the Raymonds' stone. He's got to be made to stop."

"I'll call Tut Beans at the jail," said Abe. "It's more his job than mine. Let him get old Carl Carson sore."

Jim Laury had run for sheriff of Fort County because he wanted the job. It paid pretty well, and he knew he wouldn't have to work very hard at it. Besides that, he really enjoyed dealing with law-breakers, and he knew that the most interesting ones weren't to be found among the regimented masses who huddle uncomfortably together in cities but in the small towns and the open country around them where individuality is still more than a myth.

He was tall and sleepy-looking and he talked in a slow drawl. He never moved fast unless he had to. He was wearing his long brown overcoat when he entered the funeral parlor through the side door, and he unbuttoned the collar and turned it down, wrinkling his nose distastefully at the heavy lingering odor of wilted flowers that clung to the anteroom.

Ferd Runyon tiptoed through the curtained doorway and nodded at him eagerly. "Do you wanta see Rita, Jim?" Ferd had a nervous giggle that he had labored years to control. It rated as quite a serious handicap in his business. It popped out now, unexpectedly, and Ferd clapped his hand over his mouth. "'Scuse me," he said with the ease of long practice. "My dyspepsia. . . . The remains are in here, Jim."

Laury followed him in to the back room and watched while he folded back the top of the long white sheet.

"I ain't fixed her yet," Ferd said.

She was a pretty girl. Her face was a clear oval, white and waxy, and death hadn't disturbed the childlike composure of her features.

"It's the back of her head," said Ferd. "It's smashed like an egg. Do you wanta see?"

"No," said Laury. He stood still, his shoulders hunched, staring down.

"I'm kind of bothered-like," Ferd said slowly. "You see, it's the second tragedy in the Blenning family within a month, although you really couldn't call their Uncle Mort's passing a tragedy because the old boy was sure a pest and a burden to 'em. . . . But the Blennings had to pay for his funeral, him not having a dime, and I don't think Harold had much saved. I dunno how he's gonna pay for Rita, too. But the coffin's got to be nice on account of there'll be a crowd."

"Yes," Laury said absently.

"Harold's credit is good," Ferd said, still working at his problem, "but he don't make much. . . . Jim, how is Dave Carson?"

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"He's in Doc Bekin's hospital. He's unconscious."

"He's fakin', I bet," Ferd said, and his giggle blurted out. "'Scuse me. My dyspepsia. You ain't gonna let him get away with it, are you, Jim? You ain't gonna let him get away with murderin' poor Rita Blenning just because old Carl Carson is a banker and has a lot of money, are you, Jim?"

"Maybe not," Laury answered.

"I voted for you, Jim. . . . 'Scuse me."

"That's all right," Laury said. "So long, Ferd."

Laury went back through the anteroom and out into the damp chill of the wind. The buildings of the main street stretched away from him in a double straggling row, looking cold and colorless under the leaden sky, black smoke whipping away from their chimneys in driblets. Snow that the last thaw hadn't cleared away lay in slick discolored piles along the curb.

Waldo Oostenryck was kicking his toes against the low cement step. He was bundled clumsily into a thick overcoat that had belonged to his father. He wore mittens with leather facings on their palms and a lumberjack's cap with fur earflaps. "Find any clues?" he asked, peering eagerly up at Laury through his thick glasses.

"Oh, sure," Laury said casually.

"How many? What were they?"

Laury didn't answer. He was watching a man cross the street, coming diagonally toward them.

"Boy!" Waldo said. "Here's old Carl Carson now!"

Carl Carson was thick-set, and there was solid slow strength in the way he moved. His heavy-joweled face looked tired, and the lines were deep and harsh around his mouth.

He nodded stiffly to Laury. "Hello, Jim."

"Hello, Carl," Laury said. "Waldo."

Waldo's mouth was open. "Huh?"

"Go inside and look for clues. Take your time."

Waldo tripped over the low step and knocked his head against the door. He tried to pull the door open, finally pushed it and fell into the funeral parlor.

"How do you put up with him?" Carson asked.

"You can get used to anything with practice," Laury said idly. "And his father controls 150 votes in the northern part of the county."

"I see." Carson looked down at his feet and then up again. "This is an awful business, Jim. Can you tell me anything more about it?"

"Dave and Rita went to a show together," Laury said. "Afterwards they stopped in and had hot chocolate at Bernie's Candy Shop. Then they drove out north, past the limekiln, and parked on that side road west of the old Snyder Mill in back of the cemetery. We found Rita in the car there. The door was open, and she was half-in and half-out. She'd been hit with a tire iron. It was lying beside the car."

"Doc Bekin says Dave was hit with

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that same tire iron," Carson stated. "It gave him a bad concussion."

"Is he going to be all right?"

Carson nodded. "I guess so. Jim, that wasn't Dave's tire iron. He didn't carry one. I know because the one time I was silly enough to ride in that streamlined puddle-hopper of his he had a flat. Of course he had no spare. He didn't have a tire iron either."

"Maybe he got one after that."

"No," said Carson. "Dave is absent-minded. Sometimes I think he's played so much football he's punch-drunk, but I suppose all parents have doubts about their children's sanity now and then."

"Yes," said Laury, watching him.

Carson cleared his throat. "I know what people are saying. They think that Dave and Rita had a fight and that he hit her with the tire iron and then hit himself over the head and ran through the cemetery pretending he had been knocked goofy so he wouldn't be suspected of Rita's murder."

"I've heard it hinted," Laury admitted.

Carson said: "Well, I'm his father and a little prejudiced on that account, but I don't think Dave is the type that hits people with tire irons. He's been mad at me lots of times, and he never got that violent about it. If he wouldn't do it to his father, he wouldn't do it to a stranger."

"You could hardly call Rita a stranger, could you?" Laury asked. "I got the idea somewhere that she and Dave were serious about each other."

"Then you got the wrong idea. Rita was pretty and cute, because she was young, but she was no deeper than a bird bath. She'd have made Dave miserable if he'd married her."

"Did Dave know that?"

"Yes. I told him so."

"What did he say?" Laury asked curiously.

"Told me that I was a hard-hearted old fossil with a soul like shriveled shoe leather."

"What did you say?"

"I admitted it. It's true. But what I said about Rita was true too, and Dave knew it."

"Do you suppose he told Rita what you said?"

"Dave is dumb," said Carson, "but not that dumb."

"If he had told her," Laury said, "I imagine she'd have been sort of put out about it."

"Probably."

They were silent for a moment and a car went past them with a loose chain thumping noisily under one fender.

Carson said slowly: "Being a banker in a small town like this is not all roses, Jim. You have to be hard sometimes, and people get the idea that you enjoy it, that you're sitting there snickering every time you turn down a request for a loan. No one will ever admit that he's a bum risk. He blames your actions on personal spite. A banker gets handed all the dirty little jobs that have to be done, just as a

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matter of course. People, even the best of them, resent him. They get a sort of a thrill when they think the banker is going to get it in the neck for a change. That makes them see things a little cockeyed. I'd like you to remember that, Jim."

"All right," said Laury. "Harold Blenning is coming this way."

Carson's face looked a little older suddenly. He set his shoulders solidly and turned around and waited for the other man to approach. His voice was even and emotionless as he said, "Good morning, Harold. I can't tell you how badly I feel about Rita. You and your wife have my deepest sympathy."

Harold Blenning stared at him without answering.

"Goodbye, Jim," Carson said in the same even tone. He walked down the street toward the bank, his heels clicking hard and crisp on the cement.

Harold Blenning said, "He's a mean man." He coughed once ineffectually, putting his gloved hand to his chest. His eyes were watery and red-rimmed. "Mean and hard. Don't care for nobody."

"He cares for his son," Laury said. "A lot."

"No, he don't," Blenning denied. "Not a bit. He's always mockin' at Dave — makin' fun of him because he's good-hearted and jolly. Hates for anybody to be happy, old Carson does. He wants to make Dave sour like he is."

"I don't think so," Laury said.

"I do. I know so. Old Carson cares more for a dollar than anything. He's a mean one. Dave ain't like that. Dave's a good fella. He'd never do that to Rita. No, sir. But old Carson would. You just remember that, Jim. He hated Rita, and there ain't anything he wouldn't 'a' done to stop her and Dave from marryin' like they wanted."

"Would he have hit his own son with a tire iron?"

"Yes, he would," said Harold Blenning. "He's that mean. And that's the first thing my poor wife said when she heard about our Rita. She yelled right out that it was old Carson that was to blame. You remember that."

"I'll keep it in mind," said Laury.

Blenning went in the funeral parlor and Waldo bumped into him in the doorway and stumbled down the cement step.

"Jim," said Waldo eagerly, "did old Carson offer to?"

"Offer to what?" Laury asked.

"Bribe you to lay off Dave?"

"Oh, sure," said Laury.

"How much, Jim? Five hundred?"

"Yeah."

"Boy!" Waldo exclaimed. "Did you take it?"

Laury shook his head absently. "No. I'm holding out for a thousand."

"Well, I dunno," said Waldo doubtfully. "Five hundred's a good bribe. It wouldn't be very hard for us to frame somebody, Jim. I mean they do that every day in the cities. I've read all about it, so I can tell you how."

"Later," said Laury.

He started up the street, and Waldo trotted along beside him.

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"Jim, do you want me to tell you my theories of the case?"

"Not right now. After a while."

"Where you goin' now, Jim?"

"Back to the jail."

"Are you gonna grill suspects there, Jim?"

"No."

"Well, what *are* you gonna do, Jim?" Waldo demanded.

"Take a nap."

Laury's office was pleasantly warm and gloomy. He was lying on the cracked leather couch, hands folded behind his neck, staring up at the shiny steam pipe that stretched diagonally across the ceiling, when Waldo came in and looked at him disapprovingly.

"You been sleepin' for two hours. Are you ready now?"

"Ready for what?" Laury asked.

"To hear my theories of the case."

"All right, Waldo," Laury said.

Waldo had his notes typed, and he referred to them importantly. "Well, first there's the physical aspects of the case, and they ain't much because frozen ground and packed crusted snow won't take good footprints and everybody wears gloves when it's cold so there wasn't any good fingerprints. So we've got to ratiocinate."

"Do what?"

"Use our brains. Now first we'll take the mysterious stranger."

"Who is he?" Laury inquired.

"He ain't a he, he's a theory. The police in cities always use him when they're baffled. They go and pick up some old bum and beat him over the head until he confesses."

"That sounds like a nice idea."

"Not for us," Waldo said impatiently. "There ain't no mysterious strangers in this town. Of course, we could always get the police in Lake City to catch us an old bum and ship him down here so we could frame him, but I don't think we oughta do that except as a last resort. I think first we oughta arrest the person who really murdered Rita."

"That's a pretty radical notion," Laury said.

Waldo leaned over him earnestly. "I know it, Jim. It's contrary to all modern police practice, but don't condemn it until I explain how I got it figured out. I was stopped for a while because old Carson is gonna bribe us and my preliminary survey indicated he was guilty."

"Is that so?" Laury said.

"Sure. It was obvious. He didn't like Dave to go with Rita. He knew they were out together last night, and he knew they parked out there by Snyder's Mill lots of times. So he laid for them. He bashed Rita, and then Dave got mad at him for doin' that so he bashed Dave, only not so hard."

"But now you don't think he did?"

"Not after he showed he was anxious to cooperate with us."

"Cooperate?" Laury repeated.

"Sure. That's a term the police in cities use when they want you to bribe them. They ask you if you're gonna cooperate. If they ask you if

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you're gonna cooperate with the constituted authorities, that means you've got to bribe the district attorney too. It's very technical."

"I can see that," said Laury.

"So I took a secondary survey," Waldo said. "Itemized. And now I know who is guilty."

"Who, Waldo?"

"Rita's mother. Mrs. Blenning. She's got social ambitions and she wanted Rita to marry Dave. But Dave's old man said no. So Rita was willing to sacrifice herself for Dave's happiness and not marry him. When Mrs. Blenning heard that she went into a frenzy and hid in Dave's car when it was parked in front of the picture show and beat them over the head when they parked back of the cemetery."

"That's very interesting," Laury commented gravely.

"So we'd better arrest Mrs. Blenning right away," said Waldo. "We'll grill her. I know how to do it. We'll shine a strong light in her face and take turns yelling questions in her ear and threatenin' to beat her up. When she's real scared and shaky and exhausted, we'll take her over to the funeral parlor. I'll hide under that table that Rita's lying on, and when you bring Mrs. Blenning in, I'll make Rita sit up and point at her. That'll fix her. She'll either confess or throw a fit."

"I'd bet on the fit," said Laury. "Have you got any more theories, Waldo?"

"No. But I'll think of some."

"I'm afraid you will," Laury agreed. "In the meantime, send Tut Beans up here as soon as he comes in."

Tut Beans was a wry, shy man with a skin the texture of carefully polished leather. He sat down carefully in the chair Laury indicated and looked at the floor between his feet.

Laury said, "Take your time, Tut, and tell me what happened last night."

"It was a mite after midnight, I reckon," said Tut in a barely audible murmur, "and I was sittin' in the jail office, maybe dozin' a little. Abe Frelich called up and said Dave Carson was drunk and playin' football in the cemetery and for me to come and get him. I said for Abe to do it. I said he was the caretaker of the cemetery and it was his job." Tut looked up at Laury and down again instantly. "It was all-fired cold out."

Laury nodded. "What did Abe say?"

"Said he wasn't gonna. Said he wouldn't fool with Dave Carson. Said old Carl Carson was the chairman of the cemetery committee and Abe wasn't gonna get on his blind side by roustin' Dave around. So I said I'd come."

"And then?"

"I woke up Billy Lee and let him out of his cell and told him to keep track of the place. Was that all right to do, Jim? Billy bein' a prisoner? Didn't want to leave the jail without nobody watchin'."

"Sure, Tut. How long has Billy got to serve yet?"

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"Mite over two months."

"I guess we'll have to frame him, like Waldo is always advocating, and get him sentenced again. He's too valuable a prisoner to lose."

"That Waldo," said Tut diffidently. "Seems to me like he has overly queer ideas. Don't seem reasonable to me."

"They aren't," Laury told him. "Don't pay any attention to them and don't argue with him. There's no point in it. When anybody gets as far off base as Waldo is most of the time, you might just as well let him dream."

"Been doin' that," said Tut. "Got out the county car last night and went to the cemetery. Found Dave there. Knew right away he wasn't drunk. Had the staggers, like a sick horse. Had blood on him, so I took him to Doc Bekin. Doc said it wasn't Dave's blood, so I called you. Mighty ashamed to waken you." Tut cleared his throat. "Did I do what I should, Jim? I like this job mighty well. Sure grateful to you for gettin' it."

"You do fine, Tut. You're my best deputy."

Tut swallowed hard. "Makes me mighty pleased to hear that, Jim. I'll — I'll be gettin' to work."

"All right, Tut."

The wind had died now, but the chill in the air was sharper and more penetrating. The steps squeaked mournfully under Laury's feet as he climbed up to the high front porch. He moved his hand toward the white circle of the bell and then the door opened with a rush and Mrs. Frelich said, "Hello, Sheriff! Come in and sit!"

"Afternoon, Mrs. Frelich," Laury said, and entered the narrow hall.

Mrs. Frelich indicated another door. "In here by the stove where it's warm. I've got some hot coffee right on the stove. I'll get you a cup."

"Not just now, thanks. Hate to bother you, Mrs. Frelich, but I'd like to ask a question or two."

"Why, yes," said Mrs. Frelich. "Anything. Abe said you'd be here, and I've been waiting. I'm so sorry about all this. Rita was such a sweet girl. I remember when she was born just as well. And Dave Carson. How is he, Sheriff?"

"He's still unconscious. He got hit pretty hard."

"His poor dad. I'm going to stop in and say a word to him and the Blennings too. It's terrible, the whole thing. Those poor people."

"It's hard for them," Laury agreed. "Will you show me the window where you were standing when you saw Dave?"

"Why, yes. Right up these stairs."

He followed her up and then along the narrow hall to the back bedroom.

"Here," said Mrs. Frelich. "This one. The wind was blowing like sixty, and I got up to close it."

Laury looked out the window and down the gray snow-scarred slope past the precise line of the iron fence. A dark figure was moving slowly among the tombstones.

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"Abe's fixing the Blenning lot," Mrs. Frelich explained. "It makes you feel bad to think . . . Rita was always so warm and alive."

"Seen much of Dave Carson lately?" Laury asked.

"Why, yes," said Mrs. Frelich, puzzled. "To speak to, I mean. When he comes home for weekends and vacations from college. I saw him just day before yesterday, and he joked and joshed with me. I never dreamed then . . ."

"Did you recognize him when you saw him last night?"

"Why, no," said Mrs. Frelich. "I was that scared I wouldn't have recognized anything."

"Ever had any trouble with your eyes?"

"Why, no," Mrs. Frelich said uneasily. "No. It's a little hard for me to read fine print, that's all."

Laury pointed. "See that end-post of the fence? There's a short section between it and the next post this way. How many pickets in that section?"

"Five," said Mrs. Frelich slowly.

Laury nodded. "Thanks. Well, I'll be going along."

They went silently along the hall and back down the stairs.

"Some coffee?" Mrs. Frelich suggested uncertainly.

"No, thanks."

Laury opened the door and went out on the porch. He hesitated at the head of the steps and turned around. Mrs. Frelich hadn't shut the door. She was watching him, and her plump face was lined and drawn and old.

Laury cleared his throat and then he couldn't think of anything to say. He went down the steps and on down the slope.

When he was close enough, he counted the pickets in the short section of fence. There were five of them. Laury turned around and walked along the fence to the gate and went through it and along the path between the raised grave plots.

Abe Frelich was hunkered clumsily down on his heels beside an oblong of black mud-clotted earth. A shovel and a pick lay on the ground beside him.

"'Lo, Jim," he said. "I was just thawin' the ground a bit. It's froze pretty hard for diggin'. . . ."

"Abe," said Laury. "I'm going to have to arrest you for murdering Rita Blenning."

Abe Frelich's face looked thick and lumpy. He spun around and came up to his feet with the pick raised back over his shoulder.

Laury was lying on the couch in his office with his hands folded behind his neck. "Come in," he said.

Carl Carson opened the door. "Evening, Jim. Don't want to bother you. Just thought I'd drop in . . ."

"No bother," Laury told him. "Sit down. How's Dave?"

"He's come around all right, but he doesn't remember anything that happened. Doc Bekin says that isn't unusual with concussion. Jim, do you mind telling me how you knew it was Abe?"

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"No. Mrs. Frelich is far-sighted. She's got eyes like a hawk for distance. She didn't recognize Dave when she saw him running around in the cemetery — didn't even know what it was, let alone who. But Abe did. Not only that but he popped right up with an explanation that was about as far-fetched as they come. He said Dave was drunk and playing football."

"What *was* Dave doing?"

"Chasing Abe. He was dizzy and weak and knocked goofy, but he kept going. Abe ran away from him and got in the house and pulled his nightshirt over his clothes. He was pretty scared. He didn't mean to kill anybody. He had laid for Dave and Rita several nights. He had a flour sack for a mask, and he was going to scare them plenty. But Dave jumped him.

"Abe knocked Dave down. Rita was trying to get out of the car to run, and Abe thought she was coming after him. He hit her. Then he ran himself. Dave got up and went after him."

Carson cleared his throat. "Why did Abe want to scare them, Jim?"

"Don't you know?" Laury asked.

"Well, was it because of what I said to Abe a couple weeks back?"

"Yes."

Carson sighed. "That's what I meant about being a banker . . . I'm chairman of the cemetery committee, and I was the one who had to speak to Abe. He was getting careless and lazy and insolent, and he was drinking all the time. He made an awful mess when he fixed the grave plot for the Blennings' Uncle Mort. Harold Blenning complained to me about it. I told Abe he'd have to straighten out. I was pretty rough with him."

"Yes. He held it against you and the Blennings. The best way he could get back at you both was through Rita and Dave."

"Did he make any trouble when you arrested him, Jim?"

"He started after me with his pick."

"What did you do?"

"Told him his mother was watching us from the house. He dropped the pick and started to cry. It wasn't very pleasant."

"No," Carson agreed heavily. "No. I'll see that Mrs. Frelich is cared for. . . . I spoke to John Tyler about defending Abe. . . ."

"A lawyer won't do Abe much good," Laury said. "He confessed everything."

Carson nodded. "Well . . . So long, Jim."

Carson's solid footsteps died away in the hall, and Waldo put his head cautiously around the door.

"Did you get it in unmarked bills?"

"What?" Laury said.

Waldo gestured impatiently. "The bribe!"

"Oh, that. No. I decided taking money was too risky. I made Carson promise to support me when I run for governor."

"You did?" Waldo exclaimed. "Boy! That was a smart deal, Jim! Why, with his money behind you, you can just buy thousands of votes!"

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Erskine Caldwell has had the kind of vocational background that sounds like a fiction writer's dream of what a "realistic character" should live through. He has been a cotton picker, lumber-mill hand, taxicab driver, soda jerk, cook, gunrunner, poolroom employee, waiter, professional football player, lecture-tour manager, real-estate salesman, bodyguard for a Chinese, stagehand in a burlesque house, and reporter. And there is no doubt that all these experiences with life and people have contributed to his work, which is based on complete frankness and which abounds in violence and brutality. He is the author of TOBACCO ROAD, *which as a Broadway play had the longest run in the history of the American theater, and* GOD'S LITTLE ACRE, *which has perhaps sold more copies in all editions than any book of our generation. But Erskine Caldwell has other qualities too — a genuine sympathy for the underdog, and genuine pity and understanding for the little man who, in the crisis of his life, has got to prove to himself whether he's a man of his word. . . .*

HORSE THIEF

by ERSKINE CALDWELL

I DIDN'T STEAL LUD MOSELEY'S calico horse.

People all over have been trying to make me out a thief, but anybody who knows me will tell you that I've never been in trouble like this before in all my life. Mr. John Turner will tell you all about me. I've worked for him, off and on, for I don't know exactly how many years. I reckon I've worked for him just about all my life, since I was a boy. Mr. John knows I wouldn't steal a horse. That's why I say I didn't steal Lud Moseley's, like he swore I did. I didn't grow up just to turn out a horse thief.

Night before last, Mr. John told me to ride his mare, Betsy. I said I wanted to go off a little way after something, and he told me to go ahead and ride Betsy, like I have been doing every Sunday night for going on two years now. Mr. John told me to take the Texas saddle, but I told him I didn't care about riding saddle. I like to ride with a bridle and reins, and nothing else. That's the best way to ride, anyway. And where I was going I didn't want to have a squeaking saddle under me. I wasn't up to no mischief; it was just a little private business of my own that

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nobody has got a right to call me down about. I nearly always rode saddle Sunday nights, but night before last was Thursday night, and that's why I didn't take a saddle when I went.

Mr. John Turner will tell you I'm not the kind to go off and get into trouble. Ask Mr. John about me. He has known me all my life, and I've never given him or anybody else trouble.

When I took Betsy out of the stable that night after supper, Mr. John came out to the barnyard and asked me over again if I didn't want to take the Texas saddle. That mare, Betsy, is a little rawboned, but I didn't mind that. I told Mr. John I'd just as leave ride bareback. He said it was all right with him, if I wanted to get sawn in two, and for me to go ahead and do like I pleased about it. He was standing right there all the time, rubbing Betsy's mane, and trying to find out where I was going, without coming right out and asking me. But he knew all the time where I was going, because he knows all about me. I reckon he just wanted to have a laugh at me, but he couldn't do that if I didn't let on where I was headed. So he told me it was all right to ride his mare without a saddle, if I didn't want to be bothered with one, and I opened the gate and rode off down the road towards Bishop's crossroads.

That was night before last — Thursday night. It was a little after dark then, but I could see Mr. John standing at the barnyard gate, leaning on it a little, and watching me ride off. I'd been plowing that day, over in the new ground, and I was dog-tired. That's one reason why I didn't gallop off, like I always did on Sunday nights. I rode away slow, letting Betsy take her own good time, because I wasn't in such a big hurry. I had about two hours' time to kill, and only a little over three miles to go. That's why I went off like that.

Everybody knows I've been going to see Lud Moseley's youngest girl, Naomi. I was going to see her again that night. But I couldn't show up there till about 9:30. That's why I wasn't in such a big hurry to get away from home. Lud Moseley wouldn't let me come to see her but once a week, on Sunday nights, and night before last was Thursday. I'd been there to see her three or four times before on Thursday nights, that Lud Moseley didn't know about. Naomi told me to come to see her on Thursday nights; that's why I had been going there when Lud Moseley said I couldn't come to his house but once a week. Naomi told me to come, anyway; and she had been coming out to the swing under the trees in the front yard to meet me.

I haven't got a thing in the world against Lud Moseley. Mr. John Turner will tell you I haven't. I don't specially like him, and he knows why. Once a week isn't enough to go to see a girl you like a lot, like I do Naomi. And I reckon she likes me a little, or she wouldn't tell me to come to see her on Thursday nights, when

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Lud Moseley told me not to come. Lud Moseley thinks if I go to see her more than once a week that maybe we'll take it into our heads to get married without letting him catch on. That's why he said I couldn't come to his house but once a week, on Sunday nights.

He's fixing now to have me sent to the penitentiary for twenty years for stealing his calico horse, Lightfoot. I reckon he knows I didn't steal the horse, but he figures he's got a good chance to put me out of the way till he can get Naomi married to somebody else. That's the way I figure it out; because everybody knows I'm not a horse thief. Mr. John Turner will tell you that about me. Mr. John knows me better than that. I've worked for him so long he even tried to make me out as one of the family, but I won't let him do that.

So night before last, Thursday night, I rode off from home, bareback, on Betsy. I killed a little time down at the creek, about a mile down the road, and when I looked at my watch again, it was 9 o'clock sharp. I got on Betsy and rode off toward Lud Moseley's place. Everything was still and quiet around the house and barn; it was just about his bedtime. I rode right up to the barnyard gate, like I always did on Thursday nights. I could see a light up in Naomi's room, where she slept with her older sister, Mary Lee. We had always figured on Mary Lee being out with somebody, or else being ready to go to sleep by 9:30. When I looked up at their window, I could see Naomi lying across her bed, and Mary Lee was standing beside her talking to her about something. That looked bad, because when Mary Lee tried to make Naomi undress and go to bed before she did, it always meant that it would take Naomi another hour or more to get out of the room. She had to wait till Mary Lee was asleep, and then she had to get up and dress in the dark before she could come down to the frontyard and meet me in the swing under the trees.

I sat there on Betsy for ten or fifteen minutes, waiting to see how Naomi was going to come out with her sister. After a while I saw her get up and start to undress. I knew right away that that meant waiting another hour or longer for her to be able to come and meet me. The moon was coming up, and it was as bright as day out there in the barnyard. I'd been in the habit of opening the gate and turning Betsy loose in the yard, but I was scared to do it night before last. If Lud Moseley should get up for a drink of water or something and look out toward the barn and see a horse standing there, he would either think it was one of his and come out to lock it in the stalls, or else he would catch on it was me out there. So I opened the barn door and led Betsy inside and put her in the first empty stall I could find in the dark. I was scared to strike a light, because I didn't know but what Lud Moseley would be looking out the window and see the flare of the match. I put

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Betsy in the stall, closed the door, and came back outside to wait for Naomi to get a chance to come out and meet me at the swing in the yard.

It was about 12:30 or 1 when I got ready to leave for home. The moon had been clouded, and it was darker than everything in the barn. I couldn't see my hand in front of me, it was that dark. I was scared to strike a light that time, too, and I felt my way in and opened the stall door and stepped inside to lead out Betsy. I couldn't see a thing, and when I found her neck, I thought she had slipped her bridle like she was always doing when she had to stand too long to suit her. I was afraid to try to ride her home without a lead of some kind, because I was scared she might shy in the barnyard and start to tearing around out there and wake up Lud Moseley. I felt around on the ground for the bridle, but I couldn't find it anywhere. Then I went back to the stall door and felt on it, and there was a halter hanging up. I slipped it over her head and let her out. It was still so dark I couldn't see a thing, and I had to feel my way outside and through the barnyard gate. When I got to the road, I threw a leg over her and started for home without wasting any more time. I thought she trotted a little funny, because she had a swaying swing that made me slide from side to side, and I didn't have a saddle pommel to hold on to. But I got home all right and slipped the halter off and put her in her stall. It was around 1 o'clock in the morning.

The next morning after breakfast when I was getting ready to catch the mules and gear them up to start plowing in the new ground, Lud Moseley and three or four other men, including the sheriff, came riding up the road from town and hitched at the rack. Mr. John came out and slapped the sheriff on the back and told him a funny story. They carried on like that for nearly half an hour, and then the sheriff asked Mr. John where I was. Mr. John told him I was getting ready to go off to the new ground, where we had planted a crop of corn that spring, and then the sheriff said he had a warrant for me. Mr. John asked him what for, and the sheriff told him it was for stealing Lud Moseley's calico horse. Mr. John laughed at him, because he thought it was just a joke, but the sheriff pulled out the paper and showed it to him. Mr. John still wouldn't believe it, and he told them there was a mix-up somewhere, because, he told them, I wouldn't steal a horse.

They brought me to town right away and put me in the cell-room at the sheriff's house. I knew I hadn't stole Lud Moseley's horse, and I wasn't scared a bit about it. But right after they brought me to town, they all rode back and the sheriff looked in the barn and found Lud Moseley's calico horse, Lightfoot, in Betsy's stall. Mr. John said things were all mixed up, because he knew he didn't steal the horse, and he knew I wouldn't do it. But the horse was there, the calico one, Lightfoot, and the halter

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was hanging on the stall door. After that they went back to Lud Moseley's and measured my foot tracks in the barnyard, and then they found Betsy's bridle. Lud Moseley said I had rode Mr. John's mare over there, turned her loose, and put the bridle on his Lightfoot and rode him off. The stall door was not locked, and it wasn't broken down. It looks like I forgot to shut it tight when I put Betsy in it, because she got out and come home sometime that night.

Lud Moseley says he's going to send me away for twenty years where I won't have a chance to worry him over his youngest daughter, Naomi. He wants her to marry a widowed farmer who runs twenty plows, and who's got a big white house with fifteen rooms in it. Mr. John Turner says he'll hire the best lawyer in town to take my case, but it don't look like it will do much good, because my footprints are all over Lud Moseley's barnyard, and his Lightfoot was in Mr. John's stable. I reckon I could worm out of it someway, if I made up my mind to do it. But I don't like to do things like that. It would put Naomi in a bad way, because if I said I was there seeing her, and had put Betsy in the stall to keep her quiet, and took Lightfoot out by mistake in the dark when I got ready to leave — well, it would just look bad, that's all. She would have to say she was in the habit of slipping out to see me after everybody had gone to sleep, on Thursday nights, and it would just look bad all around. She might take it into her head some day that she'd rather marry somebody else than me, and by that time she'd have a bad name, for having been mixed up with me — and sneaking out of the house.

Lud Moseley has been telling people all around the courthouse as how he is going to send me away for twenty years, so he can get Naomi married to that widowed farmer who runs twenty plows. Lud Moseley is right proud of it, it looks like, because he's got me cornered in a trap, and maybe he will get me sent away sure enough before Naomi gets a chance to say what she knows is true. But somehow, I don't know if she'll say it if she does get a chance. Everybody knows I'm nothing but a hired man at Mr. John Turner's, and I've been thinking that maybe Naomi might not tell what she knows, after all.

I'd come right out and explain to the sheriff how the mix-up happened, but I sort of hate to mention Naomi's name in the mess. If it had been a Sunday night, instead of night before last, a Thursday, I could — well, it would just sound too bad, that's all.

If Naomi comes to town and tells what she knows, I won't say a word to stop her, because that'll mean she's willing to say it and marry me; but if she stays at home, and lets Lud Moseley and that widowed farmer send me away for twenty years, I'll just have to go, that's all. I always told Naomi I'd do anything in the world for her, and I reckon this will be the time when I've got to prove whether I'm a man of my word, or not.

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

THE VELVET HAND *by HELEN REILLY* (RANDOM, $2.50)	"You should reach the solution long before the good Inspector; but . . . more restrained than usual . . ." (AB)	". . . genuinely exciting one of the best Reillys in some time." (LGO)
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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

"Professional job . . . but solution not unguessable; pace heady. Slick performance." (SC)	". . . one of the very best plot ideas of the year, worked out . . . with brilliant craftsmanship." (H-M)	
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"Clues pop up bit too neatly, but yarn is well-handled, tense." (SC)	". . . enough meat in the crimes and suspects to hold your interest." (DBH)	
"Flip style not easy to take; characters odd lot. All corn and a furlong wide." (SC)	". . . not too absorbing puzzle. Only average." (AdV)	
"Solution not unguessable, but . . . usual pro job. Well paced, smoothly told." (SC)	"Much suspicion, much intrigue, and much danger to the heroine . . ." (FC)	
". . . tale seems authentic and is full of adventure." (FC)	". . . a strong story . . . straight-line writing . . . Worth your attention." (DBH)	
". . . everybody, good and bad, is on the jump. ABC-ish, but moves along." (SC)	"Ben Benson has never written a better one than this . . . exciting and honest story." (DBH)	

KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville (Ind.) Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune*

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Westport (Conn.) Town Crier*

DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Albuquerque Tribune*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

FP: *Fay Profilet in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

EW: *Elizabeth Watts in the Boston Globe*

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"One for the Road" is a clever, amusing, and off-the-trail story by a Texan newspaperman, a major in the Marine Corps Reserve, an ex-advertising consultant and college teacher, a contributor to the "Saturday Evening Post," "Holiday," and "This Week" — a man who claims he is "not a volume producer," yet at the time of this writing is working on a novel and a Western novelette, while doing three newspaper columns a week!

ONE FOR THE ROAD

by WILL C. BROWN

THEY WERE WAITING FOR THE preacher in the gloom of the late Mr. Waylick's living room — high-collared, proper people, somberly framed by the high, dark woodwork. The flowers, except for the family wreath, were at the cemetery, where the casket would presently go, and there was nothing to stand in the way of the whiskey smell.

Detective Ellis was bothered by it.

In a corner, where his inconspicuous figure was blotted up by the faded, deathly gray wallpaper, Ellis kept elevating his weathered nose and sniffing.

Somebody was carrying a load. Enough to be half-crocked. And in Caleb Waylick's house!

Picking up drunks was strictly the chore of the uniformed men. But Ellis's personal dignity was affronted. After all, old Waylick had been the leading dry crusader in town and now he was dead. This was a man's funeral, not a football game. Why should one of the mourners come tanked up?

Ellis considered himself no smarter than thousands of small-town police detectives the country over. But he did own to the stubborn curiosity of a range steer and the exceptional smelling abilities of a Texas hound. He swung the most sensitive nose in Callahan County to the near wall and made another slow run over the room, from right to left. He checked off the other smells easily enough — the floor-length drapes with the musty odor, the perfume on Waylick's large-bosomed sister-in-law, the pipe tobacco in the side pocket of Jonas Horton, her brother, and the assorted body odors of the mourners. . . . But somewhere, cutting across the rest, was the sure voice of whiskey speaking to his nostrils. Four double bourbon highballs, he would say, as plain as if they rode a silver tray. He seemed to smell it everywhere. Did they *all* take a snort out of pure spite?

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Ellis edged through them — strangers for the most part — taking polite care not to brush his gun bulge against any of them. Waldo Payne, the undertaker, was standing out on the front porch.

"How was it, now, Mr. Payne?" Ellis asked. "He came home, you said, and fell clean down the stairs, top to bottom, and broke his neck? Is that right?"

Mr. Payne touched the buttons of his tight blue worsted with white fingers and raised sad eyes to the level of Ellis's dotted bow tie.

"Heart attack, the death certificate says."

"Well, Mr. Payne. He was the world's champion whiskey hater, now wasn't he?"

"Yes?" Mr. Payne stared at the detective.

"Some of those people in there smell like a distillery."

"Impossible!" the undertaker batted his pale eyes rapidly, looking horrified. "Disrespectful!"

"They sure are. Go in there and sniff."

"But —" Mr. Payne's eyes stopped batting. "Ridiculous! Nobody would come to Caleb Waylick's funeral with — with whiskey on his breath!"

"And him so dead set against it," said Ellis. "Why, he used to keep riding us, forcing us to raid all the taverns and roadhouses."

"What are you doing here, Ellis? Working on something?" Mr. Payne's grief-adjusted little face was poised in an unfriendly expression.

"No, I just came to the funeral. He was on the city council once, you know. Somebody thought the police department ought to be represented, sort of pay the city's last respects. So the chief sent me. Nobody else wanted to go. Course, he wasn't very popular, but I never did mind going to a buryin', even of unpopular people. It's about the last thing you can do for a man."

"Yes, it gets pretty lonesome standing before your Maker while He adds up your score." Mr. Payne turned away, sniffing. "Whiskey!"

Ellis followed him into the reception hall. Pulling on his chin, the detective fidgeted near the doorway.

When the people started coming out, he eyed them closely and called the roll with sniffs, giving each one a sharp olfactory check as he went by — even the pallbearers when they came along with the casket under the soft directions of Mr. Payne. But the odor of whiskey seemed to follow them all.

Ellis inventoried each long face and also watched their feet. If one of them staggered . . . even a fraction . . .

But none of them did.

Ellis wanted to stop the procession, to find the breath that defied him, then and there. Just wasn't right. Mr. Waylick, an embattled teetotaler in life, had no business being buried by people who smelled like the saloon fronts down on East Elm Street! If it had been anything but a funeral . . .

As it was, Ellis watched impotently as the casket was placed in the hearse at the curb and the people got into

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their cars. He saw little Mr. Payne bustling about. Finally the undertaker climbed into the front seat of the old black hearse, alongside the driver, and the procession took off for Cedarlawn.

So that was the end of Mr. Waylick. Ellis stared after the slowly moving cars, filling his pipe. Straitlaced Mr. Waylick, finally gone to his just reward. The cause of sobriety in town had lost a mighty crusader. It would shock a lot of folks, Ellis thought, thumbing a match toward the lilac bushes, to know just how Mr. Waylick went — borne graveward on the taunting wings of an alcoholic fragrance that seemed to permeate the entire neighborhood!

The detective ambled down the Waylick steps, his mind wandering back to his boyhood. That time the old brown mule had died in the east pasture of his father's farm. . . . It had been his unhappy chore to have to plow with that ornery animal after school hours. He still remembered his bitter satisfaction in giving that dead mule a surreptitious kick in the rump when nobody was looking . . .

So that was it!

Ellis went downtown with long strides.

He engaged in conversation with Henson, the white-thatched desk sergeant, bringing the talk quickly around to the late Caleb Waylick. After that, he went to the *Examiner* office and asked Stiles, the city editor, if he could look through the "morgue." He found the clips, many of them yellowing, under the heading of "Waylick, Caleb." And when he had browsed through them for an hour, he went over to the Payne Funeral Home.

He was alone with his pipe in Waldo Payne's office when the blue suit and creased face turned in at the door.

The undertaker placed his hat carefully on top of a filing cabinet and sat down at his desk. He folded his little hands on the blotter and looked across at the detective.

"The Creason child," Ellis said. "She was kin to you, Mr. Payne?"

"No. A neighbor's child." Mr. Payne's voice was fine and his thin knuckles tight.

"He got out of that one, all right." Ellis lighted his pipe and puffed thoughtfully. "Claimed she ran in front of his car. The cops in those days could be fixed. And he swung a lot of weight."

"He always did," said Mr. Payne.

"Fired two oldtimers at his store for taking a couple of drinks at a trade convention, Sergeant Henson says."

Mr. Payne nodded. "One of them, a clerk named Bronson, committed suicide. I laid Bronson out myself."

Ellis applied a match to his pipe again. "About that woman — Madge Johnson, wasn't it? He got her into trouble, then ditched her?"

"I buried her, too. Just a girl, little bit of a thing. She jumped out of a hotel window."

"He hushed that up pretty well."

Mr. Payne blinked. "You've been nosing around some," he said.

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"Some," said Ellis. "Now tell me the truth, Mr. Payne. How often did he hit the bottle?"

"Not often enough to be noticed," said the undertaker, with a certain grimness. "Maybe two or three times a year."

"Then he'd pull a good one, huh?" Ellis leaned forward. "You handled his body all by yourself, Mr. Payne?"

"Yes," said Mr. Payne, suddenly unfolding his hands. "Yes, I did."

"Sounds like something only a crazy man would do."

Mr. Payne's moist hands quit moving.

"I guess it does. What are you going to do, Ellis — expose me and make me lose my license?"

Ellis was thinking. He was just a small-town detective, a country boy new in town, and this was something out of the ordinary.

Then he remembered kicking that ornery dead mule . . .

Ellis got to his feet.

"Just tell me one thing, Mr. Payne. Why?"

"I just delivered him to the Lord the way I got him," Mr. Payne said simply. "Loaded to the gills."

Ellis went to the door. "I got an unusually good smeller, and that smelled like high-grade stuff. How much did you mix in with that embalming fluid?"

The undertaker held the door open for the detective.

"Only a fifth — but it was 100 proof."

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MURDER IN MANHATTAN

by HUGH PENTECOST

BREAKFAST WAS ALWAYS AT 11 IN the morning. Mike asked only one thing of the two girls, and that was that they come to breakfast and be on time. Since he never went to bed much before 5 in the morning, himself, it wasn't asking much. Joan usually had been up for quite a while and had only coffee at the 11 o'clock session. Erika was often with Mike on his morning rounds, and when she wasn't, she was usually on some kind of tear of her own. She'd complain sometimes about having to get up at 11. Mike pointed out that he always took a nap in the late afternoon and there was no reason she shouldn't do the same.

"Breakfast is the only time we have for any kind of family get-together," Mike always said. "We're going to have it if it kills us."

That morning I was putting the personal mail alongside Mike's place at the table in the dining-room when Kathy Adams came in. About thirteen or fourteen years ago Kathy came to New York to make her fortune as a secretary or a model. She's 32 now and she could still do all right as a model, except that she's probably the most fabulous private secretary in existence, working for the most fabulous boss, and, I might add, drawing the most fabulous salary for the job. The only thing that's happened over the years to mar her model-like good looks is a fine line between her blond eyebrows that's become engraved there from a frowning concentration on the general fabulousness.

"Fine thing," she said, "Erika's not home."

"Been and gone, or never came back?" I asked.

"Her bed hasn't been slept in," Kathy said. "I looked on the telephone pad, but there wasn't a message."

"Maybe Mike took it when he came in this morning," I said.

The little groove between Kathy's eyes deepened. "I don't think so. I spoke to William. He says he didn't hear anything from her."

William is a former club steward

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whom Mike picked up somewhere during his travels. William does all the cooking and general housework in the place.

You might say that everyone who works for Mike does a little bit of everything. I was a cub reporter on a small New England newspaper when he picked me up. Now I do leg work for him, write some items for "Off-Mike," his column, act as bodyguard, advance agent on his trips out of town, and general handy man. I love it. I love him, and I mean it quite sentimentally.

At 52, Mike Malvern has more energy, more brains, and more courage than any guy I've ever met anywhere. He can be wrong about things, but never because he was too lazy to find out the facts. His opinions may not be the same as yours, but he arrives at them from thinking, not from irresponsible emotions, and he's afraid of no man, no power, and no influence on earth.

He is probably one of the most widely read columnists in America. He believes in God, in his country, and in calling a spade a spade — to coin a phrase. A lot of people hate him for the spade-work, but not nearly so many as love him for it. He's never been afraid of the haters for himself, but he worries about his daughters. His wife died when Joan was born and he'd brought the girls up himself. There was one standing rule in the household, and it went for us as well as for Erika and Joan: Stay out as long as you like, do what you want, but if you're not going to be where you say you're going to be, phone in! If you're not coming home when you've said you were, phone in!

Erika hadn't phoned in that day. She hadn't come home and she hadn't phoned.

If it had been Joan I'd have worried. Erika was another dish of tea. She forgot once in a while, and Mike would call her for it, and she'd put her arms around him and snuggle up to him, and two minutes later she was forgiven. Joan always phoned, but if she hadn't, the lightning would have struck, and good!

William came in with the hot dishes — eggs, sausage, bacon, broiled lamb chops. Mike ate breakfast and he ate again about midnight, and that was all.

William said Erika hadn't called in during the evening. "Not at no time," he said.

The front door bell rang while Kathy and I were talking to him.

"You keep on with the breakfast, William," I said. "I'll take that."

There were two guys at the front door I'd never seen before. One was tall and thin and looked like an up-and-coming copywriter for a smart advertising agency. The other was short, fair, and my first impression was that he was the dreamy type. Then he looked at me out of the frostiest blue eyes I'd ever seen, and I changed my mind. This one flipped a police badge on me in a little black case.

"McCuller. Lieutenant. Homicide," he said, and put the badge away.

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"I'm John Rand, Assistant D.A.," the other one said. "Is Mr. Malvern in?"

"He's in, but he's just getting dressed," I said. "Our day starts late here. I'm Vance Taylor, his assistant. Can I help you?" I felt a faint prickling sensation at the back of my neck. These men meant business. Homicide and the D.A.'s office. Erika hadn't phoned in!

"We'll wait until he's dressed," McCuller said.

I took them into the library. "What's up?" I asked them.

"I think I mentioned I'm from Homicide," McCuller said.

"We haven't killed anybody here," I said, trying to make it sound light.

"Please," McCuller said wearily. "I've been up all night."

"A man named Waldo Layne has been murdered," Rand said. "We believe Malvern can give us information about him."

Mike could give you information about almost anybody in the country, or get it for you. Waldo Layne he knew all about, to his sorrow. Waldo was Erika's divorced husband. And Erika hadn't phoned in! . . .

Mike was at his place at the breakfast table when I came back from the library. Joan and Kathy were seated at the table. Mike, I saw at once, was in a foul temper.

"Oh, there you are," he said to me. "Sit down."

"There's a couple of guys in the library," I said.

"I don't want to see a couple of guys in the library," he said. "Sit down."

"But these guys —"

"Sit down, Vance. What's the matter with you?"

I sat down, and William brought me a cup of coffee. It's hard to describe Mike. He has a kind of pixyish quality when he's in a good mood. He is small and lithe and his hair is light brown without a touch of gray in it. His hands are graceful, and he uses them when he talks. He plays a very good nonprofessional piano, both hot and classical.

I watched him eat. He's a gourmet, and he insists that everything be cooked for him just so, and then he eats it so fast you can't imagine that he's really tasted a mouthful of it. Besides, he talks while he eats, in short machine-gun blasts.

"*You* haven't heard anything from Erika?" he asked me.

"No."

I saw the shadow of worry cross his face. Everybody who knew Mike was aware of his almost heartbreaking devotion to Erika. When his wife died he'd concentrated all the love and affection he had on his older daughter.

Erika would give anybody something of a jolt the first time he saw her. She had everything. She had a perfect figure, naturally red hair, and gray-green eyes that glowed with an almost electrical excitement. Except for the brief period of her marriage to Waldo Layne, Erika was Mike's constant companion. She made the rounds of

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the hot spots with him at night, she went on his holidays with him, she knew how to do all the things that flattered and pleased him. When he gave one of his rare parties she presided as hostess with dignity, charm, and just the right amount of casualness.

She knew her way around Mike's world with a sure instinct. As far as I was concerned, she was as out of reach as the top ornament on the Christmas tree at Radio City — so far out of reach that I didn't really want her. And also there was Joan. But I admired and respected Erika.

That morning, sitting at the breakfast table, still holding back the news about Waldo, I remembered a conversation I'd had with her one day. It came after a row with Mike over something that had gone wrong which he thought was my fault and I thought wasn't. Erika was sitting in the library, which opened off Mike's office, and I guess she couldn't have helped overhearing the argument.

"Take it easy, Vance," she said, as I came storming out of the office.

"That maniac!" I said. "He'll never admit he's wrong about anything."

"And he never is," Erika said. She took hold of my arm and pulled me down on the couch beside her. "He can be mistaken, Vance, but he's never wrong in principle. That's what's so wonderful about him."

"Right now he's for the birds, as far as I'm concerned," I said.

She looked past me with a kind of a dreamy light in her gray-green eyes. "I get rebellious myself once in a while," she said. "He's so arbitrary about some things. But it's never out of meanness, or cantankerousness, or vanity."

"It's all very well for you to talk," I said. "All you have to do is ask for the moon and he'll get it for you."

She smiled. "Sometimes I wish that wasn't true. There is so much to live up to! Still, it's a wonderful thing to be loved like that, Vance."

I remembered that now, as I saw Mike's worry. He put his knife and fork down on his plate. "I won't have the rules broken," he said, "particularly now. I won't have it from any of you."

He said it straight at Joan. I saw her look down at her hands. Joan is a small, somewhat darker edition of Mike. Some people may not think she's pretty. I think she's beautiful. The trouble is she doesn't know I'm alive. She treats me like the boy next door. She knew and I knew and Kathy knew what was eating Mike. He wished one of us, not Erika, had broken the rules. I never knew Mike's wife, but they tell me Erika is a ringer for her. It kills him when Erika makes him worry, because he idolizes her. If it were Joan it wouldn't matter so much.

"Why 'particularly now'?" I asked.

He took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. "I don't want to believe it," he said. "I *can't* believe it. But there's a leak somewhere. Stuff that's coming to me from confidential sources is getting out."

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"That's impossible," Kathy said quietly.

She's the one who handles everything. Information comes to Mike from every conceivable source; from people he pays and from people who volunteer it. It comes from hat-check girls and society matrons, from bartenders and bank presidents, from punks and chiselers and ministers and statesmen. Some of it is usable and some of it isn't. Some of it is fact and some of it is just plain filth. But all of it is on file.

To protect himself, Mike makes a record of every piece of information that comes his way, the exact hour and minute and place where he received it, and whom it came from. There's material in that file that would blow thousands of people sky-high if it was ever released. The file was kept in a modern vault in his office off the library.

I don't think the vault could be broken into. It certainly never had been. It was never left carelessly open. Kathy had access to it. I had access to it. Kathy knew everything that was in the file. I could find out if I wanted to. There was just us.

"All right, all right; stop looking sore," Mike said to me. "If I can't trust you and Kathy I'd better blow my brains out. But there has been a leak, all the same."

"Look," I said. "A guy gives you a piece of information. It gets out somehow. He blames you. But maybe he told other people, or maybe someone else knew."

"Of course," Mike said. "I figured that angle, Vance. I figured it had to be that way. Stuff *has* been getting out and I *have* been blamed for it, but I shrugged it off. Then last night I got it between the eyes from Joe Ricardo."

Joe Ricardo is what the newspapers like to call an "Overlord of the Underworld." He's a smooth, tough guy who, so far as I know, has been able to keep clean of the law — but he's not to be fooled around with, all the same.

"Ricardo has heard the rumor that I was leaking stuff," Mike said. "Get this — he heard I was using private information for purposes of blackmail. He thought if the racket was big enough, he could give me protection. For a price, naturally."

"Mike, how absurd!" Kathy said.

Joan just sat there, looking down at her hands.

"Ricardo framed me," Mike said evenly. "He rigged up a story. It was an item on Ed Johnson, the producer. He and Johnson are friends. You know the item, Kathy. It's in the file — about Johnson and Ricardo's girl."

Kathy nodded.

"Johnson was approached yesterday with a blackmail demand on the basis of that item," Mike said.

"By whom?"

"A phone conversation. A man. Johnson couldn't identify the voice. But you see where that leaves us? They planted the story with us to see if it would leak, and it did." He looked around at us. "How?"

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I didn't have an answer. Neither did Kathy or Joan. It wasn't possible.

"My whole life, my whole career, depends on my handling the information I get with integrity," Mike said.

"The leak isn't here," I said. "The leak is at the source somewhere."

"We have to prove that, Vance. We have to prove it or we're in bad trouble." He pushed back his chair. "And we aren't going to do it sitting here."

Then I remembered McCuller and Rand. "You've got to see those guys in the library," I said. "A homicide dick and an assistant D.A."

"What about?" Mike asked.

I took a deep breath. "It seems somebody caught up with your ex-son-in-law last night."

"Waldo?"

I could see it all flash behind his eyes — the anguish Erika's unhappy marriage had caused him, the way he hated Waldo Layne's guts.

"I don't know any of the details," I said.

I saw Kathy look from Mike to Joan. Joan was staring down at her hands, motionless, almost as though she'd heard none of it.

Mike put out his cigarette in the ash tray on the table. "Let's go talk to them," he said. He started toward the door, and then turned back to Kathy, whose face had suddenly gone very white. "Find out where Erika is," he said. "I'm worried about her."

As nearly as I can make out, Waldo Layne had always been a heel. He grew up in a family with money, and he never went without anything he wanted until he was a grown man. He went to the best schools and to a famous Ivy college. He was an athlete of sorts, and might have been really good if he'd had the proper temperament. But he was a show-off from the word "go." Once he intercepted a forward pass and ran 40 yards for a winning touchdown against Princeton. He would describe the play in detail without any encouragement whatsoever. Some remote disability kept him out of the Army. Then his family lost all their money and Waldo was on his own. He fiddled around, trying to be an actor, but he didn't have the talent for it. He finally wound up being a kind of glamor-host for a night spot on the East Side. He carefully cultivated women with money.

It was in his capacity as host at the night spot that he met Erika. Mike took her there one night on his rounds. I don't know what she saw in Waldo. She could pick and choose her men. Waldo had something for her, that's all. The marriage came as about the biggest shock Mike ever had. He and I had gone to Chicago to cover a political convention, and when he came back Erika and Waldo met us at LaGuardia with their little announcement. Mike never showed them by the turning of a hair how he felt, but he took it hard when I was alone with him.

Waldo had no money. Mike put up the dough for a charming little apartment on the East Side. Waldo gave

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up his job and tried to chisel his way into Mike's act. On that Mike wouldn't give an inch. The truth was he couldn't have anybody on his staff he couldn't trust. Nobody trusted Waldo. He would turn up from time to time with items for Mike, obviously expecting to be paid for them. They were rarely usable, and, besides, every cent Waldo spent came indirectly from Mike.

It lasted about a year, until Erika began coming home in a state from time to time, once with a black eye. Waldo was drinking and he had begun to chase around after other dames. The marriage came to a breaking point and Mike whisked Erika out to Reno, where she got a divorce. Since then she'd been living at home again, and Mike was relatively at peace. He was never happy when she was very far out of his sight. . . .

In the library it was Rand who told us what had happened. McCuller seemed satisfied to sit back and let the assistant D.A. do the talking. Waldo was living in a cheap theatrical hotel just off Broadway. About 3 in the morning the hotel clerk got a phone call from a woman, who wouldn't give her name, saying there was something wrong in Waldo's room. The clerk and the house detective went upstairs, and found Waldo lying on the floor with a bullet hole between his eyes. There was no gun, and the homicide squad hadn't turned up anything in the way of a clue.

"The Wakefield hasn't a very savory reputation as a hotel," Rand said. "Layne could entertain anyone he chose at any time of day or night, as long as his bill was paid. Of course the management denies this, but it's true. We figure the woman who made the phone call was someone who came to see Layne early this morning, found him dead, slipped away, and phoned from outside. We haven't any kind of a lead to her."

Mike stood during the whole recital, his hands locked behind him. His face was frozen in a fixed expression of detachment, almost as if he weren't listening. But when Rand finished he spoke.

"What do you want of me?" he asked.

"Please!" McCuller said, speaking for the first time. "The man was a member of your family for a while. Who are his friends? Who had it in for him? Add him up for us, Malvern."

"You've added him up for yourself," Mike said. "He was a heel."

McCuller sighed. "You don't want to help?"

"Any way I can."

"Incidentally, we'd like to talk to Mrs. Layne," Rand said.

A nerve twitched in Mike's cheek. "She's not at home just now."

"When do you expect her?"

"I don't know exactly," Mike said. He looked down at his fingernails. "She went out before I was up this morning. I don't know where she is."

"You're not sorry Layne is dead," McCuller said casually.

"I don't wish any man a violent death," Mike said. "I particularly and

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pointedly disliked Layne, if that's what you're asking."

McCuller heaved himself up out of his chair. "Just routine," he said, "but I suppose you can account for your movements last night and early this morning."

Mike smiled faintly and nodded at me. "My perpetual alibi," he said. "I never go anywhere without Vance."

"I can write you out an itinerary," I said. Then I glanced at Mike, wondering. There had been a period of nearly two hours last night when he'd gone up to Joe Ricardo's apartment and left me waiting for him in a bar across the street.

"Write out the itinerary," McCuller said. He turned to Mike: "I won't wait for Mrs. Layne, but I want to see her as soon as you can get in touch with her."

"Of course," Mike said. McCuller started for the door, and Mike checked him. "I'm a newspaperman," he said. "Because of Layne's connection with me I can't ignore this, although it's not strictly my department. Would it be possible to see his room at the hotel?"

"Why not?" McCuller said. "We're going there now." He looked at me. "Bring along a piece of paper and you can write out that itinerary on the way in the taxi."

Mike told Kathy where we were going and told her if Erika called she was to phone him at Layne's room at the Wakefield. If he didn't hear from her he'd check back with Kathy as soon as he left there.

I found out on the way to the Wakefield that McCuller wasn't kidding about the itinerary. He even lent me his pen to write with. I had no chance to check with Mike, and I couldn't get any kind of tip-off from him. He seemed to be studiously avoiding me. It wasn't that there was any reason why he shouldn't have visited Joe Ricardo. That sort of thing was part of his work. The point was that I couldn't really alibi him for a two-hour stretch. I don't know why it bothered me. The idea that he might have killed Waldo never entered my head.

I finally wrote everything down just the way it had happened, including a list of people we'd seen and talked with in various spots during the evening. When I handed it to McCuller he didn't look at it. He just folded it up and put it in his wallet.

The Wakefield was a dingy place. There was something shifty about the manager, the clerk, and the house dick. It was hard to tell whether they had something to hide about Waldo, or whether they were afraid that general violations might be unearthed during the murder investigation. They were too greasily co-operative, somehow.

Waldo's room was a mess. Clothes strewn around, the desk a mass of unsorted notes, letters, and papers, cigarette butts everywhere. The smooth, slick young man you saw at night clubs was revealed here as disorderly and unfastidious. Waldo himself was gone. I wasn't sorry.

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"The door has a snap lock," Rand said, "and it hasn't been forced. The house detective had to use a passkey to get in after they'd had the phone call from the woman."

Mike stood looking around the room with an air of distaste. I imagined he was thinking that Erika had had to put up with this sloppy unpleasantness.

"The woman must have had a date with him," Mike said, "came upstairs, found the door open, and went in. She probably ran out, closing the door behind her."

"That's the way we figure it," McCuller said.

"The gun?" Mike asked.

"Small caliber," McCuller said. "I haven't the ballistics report yet. Probably the kind of gun a woman could carry in a handbag."

"What makes you think a woman killed him?" Mike asked sharply.

"I don't think anything," McCuller said. "I just say it was that kind of a gun." He shook his head. "A case like this you just check and check and check," he said. "His friends, his acquaintances, everyone he saw yesterday, everywhere he went, his past, present, and what might have been his future. That's where you and Mrs. Layne can help us, Malvern. I'd like to get at it."

"He had no friends," Mike said quietly. "He fed off people until they had no more to give, or couldn't take him; and then he turned to others. That was his past and his present." He raised his eyes to look directly at McCuller. "I think his future was always what happened here last night."

"Somebody was bound to get him sooner or later?"

"Violence of some sort," Mike said, and turned to the door. . . .

You can't go anywhere with Mike that he isn't recognized. We left McCuller and Rand at the Wakefield, after promising to let them know the minute Erika showed up at home. We went across the street to a little bar and grill. The proprietor spotted Mike at once. He would have given Mike the joint, and he acted hurt when Mike said all he wanted was some plain soda with a half a lime in it. I ordered a cup of coffee. We went to a booth at the back of the place. Mike lit a cigarette and sat there staring at the table-top until the soda and coffee came and we were alone again.

He took a sip of his drink and looked up at me. "I'm *not* sorry about Layne," he said.

"Why should you be?"

He took a deep breath. "Work has to go on just the same," he said.

"Yeah."

He took out a pocket notebook. There were some clippings in it. I cut them out every morning and leave them for him, along with the mail, on the breakfast table. They're usually news items I think he might be interested in following up. He glanced through them quickly.

"How come we didn't hear of this fire at the Hotel Spain while we were doing our rounds last night?" he asked.

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"It happened while you were at Ricardo's," I said. "Nobody knew where we were."

"Twelve people burned to death." He shuddered. "Death by fire is the worst of all."

"Not pleasant."

"You'd better dig up what you can on it. There's no list of the dead or injured here."

"It was from an early edition," I said. "Don't you want to cover it yourself?"

He shook his head. "Check with the fire chief on the cause," he said. "There are probably dangerous violations in places like that all over the city. It might make a running story."

"Right."

"When you've got all you can, come back to the house."

"You're going there?"

"I want to see Erika the minute she gets back," he said. "Layne's death will be a shock to her. She did love him once, you know."

"Or thought she did."

"What's the difference?" he said. "I want to be with her when she hears about it. She'll need me."

So we separated, and I went to see what had happened at the Hotel Spain. Ordinarily, it would have been an interesting story to cover, but I couldn't get over my feeling of uneasiness about Erika. Some months ago, when Mike was getting some anonymous letters threatening him and his family, he bought Erika and Joan each a small .22 revolver to carry, and got licenses for them. That was the first thing I'd thought of when McCuller mentioned the type of gun used to kill Waldo Layne.

The fire at the Hotel Spain had been pretty grim. It was an old family-type hotel about twelve stories high. The fire had started on the fifth floor, and it must have been a lulu, because the seven top stories had been completely gutted. The twelve people who had died in the fire had all been trapped above the fifth floor. Others had escaped, but those twelve had either been unable to get to safety or had not become aware of the danger until too late. Bodies had been taken to the morgue, and so far there had been no definite identifications. That is to say, the authorities had, by checking with the survivors, been able to tell who the twelve dead were, but the bodies themselves had been burned beyond recognition.

I looked over the list of the dead and saw no names there that meant anything to me. It's cold-blooded, but my concern was with names that would mean something in the news. The fire department wasn't prepared to make any sort of statement as to how the blaze got started, though they hinted someone might have dropped a lighted cigarette in some trash can. There was no suggestion of arson.

I had a look upstairs. My press pass and my connection with Mike got me most places I wanted to go. When I finally returned to the lobby the place was jammed with anxious people, checking on the safety of friends or relatives. I started to push my way

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through the crowd toward the front doors, and then I stopped dead. Standing in the center of the crowd was Joan Malvern.

She didn't spot me until I'd worked my way over to her and put my hand on her arm. She swung around to face me and I was shocked by the look in her eyes. She was scared stiff.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I — I had a friend who lived here," she said.

"Who?"

"A — a girl I know."

"What's her name?"

"Vance, what are you trying to do? Give me a third degree?"

"What's the matter with you?" I said. "I happen to have a list of the casualties here in my pocket. What's your friend's name?"

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Eloise Morton," she said.

That was a facer, because I remembered the name. It was about third from the bottom on the list of the dead. I took Joan's arm in a firm grip. "Let's get out of here," I said.

She didn't say anything till we got out on the sidewalk. Then she stopped and faced me. "Her — her name is on the list?"

"I'm sorry, Joan."

Her legs started to buckle under her. I grabbed her and started looking for some place to take her, but she managed to get hold of herself.

"Would you buy me a brandy, Vance?"

I found a place a couple of doors down the street. She drank the brandy, choking a little on it, and I ordered her another. We sat at a little table, and she didn't say anything. She just twisted and untwisted her handkerchief around her fingers.

There was no use not talking about it. "I never heard you mention this friend of yours," I said.

"She — she was an old school friend," Joan said.

"Oh."

"Where's Father?" she asked, her eyes fixed on the twisted handkerchief.

"He's gone home to wait for Erika. The police want to talk to her. Waldo's death will be a nasty shock."

"Yes."

"Look, Joan; we all have to die sometime. Maybe it comes easy or maybe it comes hard."

"I know."

"It's funny," I said. "I'm sorry about Eloise Morton, and I never heard of her till ten minutes ago. I knew Waldo well — and I'm not sorry."

"The early afternoon papers have the story on Waldo," she said. "The police say some woman who came to see him tipped them off."

"That's right."

"Have they found out who she was?"

"Waldo had a million of them," I said. "She called from outside. She didn't give a name."

Joan didn't say anything more. She just sat and stared at the handkerchief.

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"Joan," I said, "you remember that little revolver Mike gave you a few months back."

"Yes," she said listlessly.

"You know where it is?"

"In my top bureau drawer at home. I never carried it, Vance. I couldn't have shot anybody if my life depended on it."

"Maybe I better take you home."

"No," she said sharply.

"You still look pretty rocky."

"I — I better get in touch with Eloise's family," she said.

"Can I help?"

"No, thanks, Vance. No; thanks very much."

She stood up, and I never saw anybody look so white. But she walked quite steadily out of the place. . . .

We were getting it in reverse when I got back to the house. Reporters were hanging around the front entrance, along with a dozen or so photographers. They all crowded around me, demanding in:

"You know how it is, Vance. It's a job we have to do."

"I'll see what I can work out for you," I told them, and opened the front door.

Inside, I glanced at my wrist watch. It was nearly 4 in the afternoon. I went through the library into Mike's office.

He was sitting at his desk, but he wasn't working. His elbows rested on the desk and his face was buried in his hands. He lifted his head quickly as I came in. "Any news?"

"It was quite a fire," I said. "Twelve known dead. It turns out one of them was an old school friend of Joan's."

"I didn't mean that," he said impatiently. "Is there any news of Erika?"

"I haven't been looking for Erika," I said. "Haven't you heard from her?"

"Would I be asking if I had?" Then he turned away. "I'm sorry, Vance. I am afraid I've gotten panicky. There hasn't been any word from her. Surely she'd have heard about Waldo by now and gotten in touch."

"That girl can sleep the clock around," I said. "If she holed up with some friend for the night she may not be awake yet, not if they did a late turn."

"Thanks," he said drily.

"For what?"

"For not saying what you really think."

"That *is* what I think."

He brought his fist down hard on the desk. "There's something badly wrong. We all know it. We just don't want to admit it."

"Okay," I said. "Then let's do something practical about it. We'll start calling her friends. One of them will —"

"What do you think Kathy and I have been doing all afternoon?" he cut in. "We've called everybody we can think of that she knows. We've called every number in the address book on her telephone table. We've called the hospitals" — his voice cracked — "even the morgue."

"Well," I said, as cheerfully as I

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could, "if there hasn't been an accident and she isn't in the morgue, that ought to take part of the load off your mind."

"She could have driven out of town with someone. There could have been an accident somewhere else — Jersey — Connecticut — Long Island. How can we begin to cover those possibilities?"

"Look, take it easy," I said. "The best bet is that she tied one on last night with some of those crack-brained friends of hers. She rolled in at 5 or 6 in the morning somewhere and stayed overnight."

"Why wouldn't she call me?" Mike said. "She knows the rules. Even at 6 or 7 in the morning she should call."

Ordinarily, he'd get sore if you suggested Erika might have been drinking. He was so worried now he almost preferred to think so.

"She knows you don't like her to get tight," I said. "It's just after 4 now. If they rolled in, say about 6 this morning, it's only ten hours. Erika's just getting her second wind of sleep when it's ten hours."

He smiled, very faintly. Erika's sleeping jags were a family joke."

"And let's face it," I said. "We don't know *all* of her friends. You can easily have missed up on someone."

He seemed to relax a little. He reached out for a cigarette in the box on his desk. "Thanks for the pep talk," he said. He gave me an odd, narrowed look. "I don't know how I'd have got on without you these last few years, Vance."

I grinned. "I hope you never do find out how."

"I hope not," he said.

Somehow, the way he said it wiped the grin off my face. "There's a mob of reporters outside, Mike. Don't you think —?"

"No. Not till we hear from Erika," he said.

"I'm going to grab off a sandwich from William. I haven't eaten since breakfast."

"Okay," he said. I started for the door, and he called after me: "What was that you said when you first came in, about some friend of Joan's?"

"Girl named Eloise Morton," I said. "Joan went to school with her. She burned to death at the Spain."

"Morton?" He frowned. "I don't seem to remember her. Does Joan know?"

"I ran into her at the Spain, checking. She took it pretty hard. I bought her a brandy and she went off to see the Morton girl's family."

"This seems to be a rough day for a lot of people," Mike said, and forgot I was there.

I went out through the library and started back toward the kitchen. Kathy hailed me. She was coming down from upstairs. She didn't look herself, either. I guess the strain was telling on everyone.

"What do you make of it, Vance?" she asked.

"She's asleep somewhere," I said.

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"It could be," I said. "You've

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checked for accidents, Mike tells me. That makes it more likely."

"Vance, I'm scared," she said. "Mike dictated some notes to me on the Layne business. The gun — the small-caliber gun —"

"You, too?" I said. "I thought about those toys Mike bought the girls."

"I just checked upstairs," Kathy said. "I can't find them."

"Let's face it," I said. "Erika takes a pot shot at Waldo and goes into hiding!"

Kathy's eyes widened. "But both guns are missing, both Joan's and Erika's," she said. . . .

McCuller showed up at the house about 5 o'clock. He looked shot, and I realized he'd been on the go steadily since he'd been called to the Wakefield at three in the morning. He also looked as though his patience had frayed a little at the edges. He had another guy with him, an old man with a loose, twitching mouth. McCuller told him to sit on a chair by the front door. He didn't introduce him.

"Mrs. Layne?" McCuller asked me.

"She hasn't turned up yet," I told him.

"Where's Malvern?"

"In his study."

"Let's go."

"I don't think he wants to see anybody right now."

"That's too bad," McCuller said. "Let's go."

Mike apparently hadn't moved since I left him. He gestured to us to come in, and tried to make an effort to straighten up and be himself.

McCuller came over to the desk and stood looking down at Mike. "Let's stop kidding around," he said. "Where's Mrs. Layne."

Mike played it straight. "The honest truth is, I don't know, Lieutenant," he said.

"That's better," McCuller said. "She didn't come home last night, did she?"

"No," Mike said. "I've been trying to locate her. I've called her friends — I've checked hospitals — the whole routine."

"You should have told me this morning," McCuller said. "I'd have started a systematic search."

"I didn't think it was serious this morning," Mike said. "It's not unusual for her to spend the night with friends."

"Without telling you?"

"That isn't usual," Mike said, "but it has happened. I expected to hear from her at any time."

"Do you expect to hear from her now?" McCuller asked, his voice expressionless.

"Of course," Mike said.

McCuller's eyes moved slowly around the room. "Do you have a photograph of Mrs. Layne?"

"Yes. In my bedroom upstairs."

"May I see it?"

"Vance —"

I went up to his room and got the leather-framed portrait of Erika that stood on his bedside table. It was one of those two-picture frames, and in

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the opposite side from Erika's was a picture of her mother. They did look alike.

When I came back downstairs I noticed the old guy was no longer sitting on the chair by the front door. I found him in the study with McCuller and Mike.

The detective reached out for the photograph. He studied it a moment and then handed it to the old man. "The one on the right," he said.

The old man stared at it with rheumy, frightened eyes.

"Night elevator man at the Wakefield," Mike said casually. "He remembers taking a dame up to Waldo's room about 2:30 this morning." Mike didn't seem worried.

"Well?" McCuller said.

The old man shook his head, first uncertainly, and then with more assurance. "It wasn't her," he said. "I'm pretty sure it wasn't her."

"Pretty sure?"

"Positive," the old man said. "I'm positive, Lieutenant."

McCuller sighed. "We'll check again in the flesh when Mrs. Layne turns up," he said. "This is a good likeness, Malvern?"

"Excellent," Mike said.

McCuller put the picture down on the desk. "What do you propose to do about finding her?"

"If she's in New York I'll know in the next two or three hours," Mike said.

"How?"

Mike smiled faintly. "Every headwaiter, bartender, hat-check girl, and half the taxi drivers in town are my friends," he said. "They'll locate her if she's around. I've already spread the word."

"How about Missing Persons?" McCuller said.

"I'd rather hold off for a few hours," Mike said. "I still think she's with friends somewhere and hasn't heard the news."

McCuller looked at his watch. "At 8 o'clock I send out a general alarm for her," he said. "I don't know why I wait, except I need a couple of hours' sleep, myself." He took a pencil out of his pocket and wrote a phone number on Mike's desk pad. "My home. Call me there the minute you hear anything."

"I will, and thanks," Mike said.

I walked out through the library with McCuller and the old guy. Just as we got into the entrance hall the front door opened and Joan came in. During the moment the door was open I could hear the reporters on the front steps still gabbing at her. She threw us a quick look and went straight for the stairway.

The old guy reached out and tugged at McCuller's sleeve. "That's her."

"What?"

"That's her — the one that came to the hotel last night."

"You're sure?"

"Sure I'm sure, Lieutenant. That's her, all right."

"Just a minute, miss," McCuller called out.

Joan turned to face him, holding tightly to the stair rail. . . .

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Mike stood by the window in his study, his back turned to us, looking out at the darkening street. Joan was huddled in the big leather armchair beside Mike's desk. McCuller prowled back and forth in front of her, firing questions at her. I stood off to one side, the inside of my mouth dry.

"You know I don't have to give you the break of questioning you here in front of your father, Miss Malvern," McCuller said. "I could take you down to headquarters and really put you through it."

"I know." Joan's voice was small and far away.

"You went to see Waldo Layne at 2:30 this morning. Why?"

"Personal reasons," Joan said.

"Miss Malvern, I'm not going to take that kind of answer. What personal reasons?"

"I — I wanted to see him," Joan said.

"You don't say!" McCuller was angry. "I didn't suppose you had any other reason for going there. But why did you want to see him?" Joan didn't answer, and he shouted at her. "*Why?*"

"I — I was in love with him," Joan said.

I saw Mike's shoulders sag, but he didn't turn. My own world went floating off into space. Joan and Waldo!

"Were you in the habit of visiting him in the middle of the night?" McCuller asked.

"No."

"What was the reason for this visit, then?"

"I — I hadn't heard from him for days," Joan said. She didn't look at McCuller or me or Mike. She just stared straight ahead. "I was worried. I — I couldn't stand it any longer so I went to see him."

"At 2:30 A.M.?"

"It may have been," Joan said. "I — I wasn't concerned with the time."

"You got to the hotel and went up in the elevator. You didn't announce yourself?"

"No."

"What made you think Layne would be in?"

"If he — he hadn't been I'd have waited for him upstairs."

"But he was?"

Joan's eyes closed for an instant, and then opened in that fixed stare. "His door was half open. I knocked. When he didn't answer I looked in and — and I saw him, lying on the floor."

"You went into the room?"

"No. I — I ran," Joan said.

"You didn't even stop to see if he was alive, if he needed help?"

"I didn't think he was alive."

"Why?"

"I — I don't know. I just didn't think so."

"So you ran away and left him?"

"Yes."

"Then what?" McCuller asked, as if he didn't believe a word she'd said.

"I ran down the service stairs and out into the street."

"You didn't want to be found there?"

"No."

"You loved this man," McCuller said, his voice rising, "but you ran

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away, without making sure he was dead, without trying to get help for him?"

"About a block from the hotel I found a drugstore that was open," Joan said. "I called the hotel from the coin box and told them something was wrong with Waldo."

"And then?"

"I came home," Joan said.

McCuller paced back and forth for a moment. "Were you having an affair with this man while he was still married to your sister?"

"No!"

"It began after they were separated?"

"Yes."

"And now he was tired of you?"

"I — I suppose so," Joan said.

I felt sick at my stomach. I wanted to get out of there, but I couldn't move. Joan, carrying on with that louse Waldo, and we'd never even dreamed of it.

McCuller went over it in earnest now. He made her describe the hotel lobby, the clerk, the old elevator guy, the color of the rug in Waldo's room. It was as though he wanted to shake her story, but she had every detail of it cold. She didn't miss up on a thing. And all the time Mike stood with his back to her, staring out the window. Finally McCuller came to the point I'd been waiting for and dreading:

"Do you own a .22 caliber revolver, Miss Malvern?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"In my bureau — in my bedroom upstairs."

"Did you carry it with you last night?"

"I've never carried it," Joan said. "My father gave it to me some months ago when we'd received threatening letters, but I never carried it."

"You didn't have it with you last night and you didn't shoot Waldo Layne?"

"No!"

McCuller let his breath out slowly. "Let's go look at it."

Mike didn't move. I hesitated, and then followed Joan and McCuller upstairs. McCuller didn't seem to notice I was there. Joan went straight to the bureau and opened the top right-hand drawer. She reached into it, seemed surprised, pulled the drawer out farther and really searched. Then she turned to McCuller.

"It — it doesn't seem to be here," she said.

"It seems open and shut, Miss Malvern. Woman scorned — that's the motive. You were there. You own the right kind of gun, which has disappeared. I don't have any choice."

"I — I can see that," Joan said.

"For heaven's sake, Joan, if you took the gun last night —!" I started to say.

"I didn't take it, Vance," she said. "I don't know what's become of it."

"Joan," I said, and I guess my voice cracked a little.

"I'm sorry, Vance," she said.

After that McCuller took her away. As he said, he had no choice. . . .

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Mike never showed. He never came out of his study when McCuller left with Joan. I warned Joan not to do any more talking till we got our lawyer to her, and then I went to find Mike.

He was back at his desk when I went into the study, and he looked at me as though I were a stranger.

"McCuller's taken her downtown," I said. "Her gun is missing. You'd better call Charley Carson and get him down to her at once."

"I'm through with her," he said, slowly and distinctly.

"That's no way to talk, Mike! She's your daughter."

"I'm through with her," he said again. He got up and walked over to the window. He started to talk, with his back to me. "She killed her mother getting born," he said, in a voice I'd never heard. "She has never brought me anything but tragedy. Now this! Waldo Layne! Sneaking out at night to see him! Loving *him!* Wasn't what he did to Erika enough? So she killed him, because he got tired of her! Well, let her pay the price for it."

I was so shocked I couldn't speak for a minute. "No matter how you feel," I said, "she's your daughter and you can't let her go undefended. Call Carson."

"The courts supply lawyers," he said.

"If you don't call Carson, I will."

He turned back from the window. "Let me remind you, Vance, you are an employee here. You'll do as I say or you'll go out the front door so fast you won't know what hit you."

"Are you going to call Carson?" I asked. I could feel the blood pounding in my temples.

"No," he said.

"Good-by, Mike," I said. "It was nice knowing you — up until tonight!"

I ran out of the room, and almost collided with Kathy, who was just outside the study door. I could tell by the look on her face that she'd heard. She didn't say anything, but she took hold of my arm and walked out through the library with me into the entrance hall.

"Take it easy, Vance," she said. "I've already called Carson."

"Then you better go pack your trunk," I said.

"A good secretary anticipates her boss's wishes," she said. "I assumed he'd want Carson on the job. He didn't tell *me* not to call him."

"What's the matter with Mike?" I said. "He talks like a crazy man."

"Find Erika," she said, "and he'll come back to normal. How much can a man take in one day?"

"I walked out on him," I said. "That's that."

"Don't be foolish," Kathy said. "He'll have forgotten it, and so will you in a couple of hours."

"That he should hate Joan so much —" I said.

She looked up into my eyes. "Love and hate are back to back on a coin, Vance," she said. "You haven't been kidding me, buster. I know how you've felt about Joan. What do you feel about her now?"

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"I guess that's the $64 question," I said. "Right now I don't feel anything — about anything."

"Go somewhere and cool off," Kathy said. "Be on the job tomorrow morning. I'll fight out the Carson thing with him." She turned her head, that little frown between her eyes, to glance at the study door.

"Since you just let down my back hair," I said, "how about I let down yours? You've been in love with Mike ever since you went to work for him."

"Sure, I have," she said quietly. "He's the most wonderful guy in the world. But it doesn't do me any good." She patted my shoulder and then started off for the study. . . .

I suppose every man who has ever gotten a sock in the teeth from the woman he loves has reacted foolishly about it, all the way from getting drunk to punching the wrong guy in the nose. I thought I would be smart and do neither of those things. I would keep busy. It was important, if anybody was going to act sanely, to find Erika. I knew all of Mike's contacts in the city. I set out to check on who'd seen Erika last night and whom she'd been with. And it was at the sixth place that I came across my first lead. There was a young playwright around town named Austin Graves who had been giving Erika quite a rush, and I heard that they'd been having cocktails together in the bar in the Bijou Club around 7 o'clock.

I didn't call Graves. I went to his apartment, a brownstone in the East Fifties. He opened the door to me, and when he saw me his face went the color of the chartreuse walls in his living-room.

"Vance!" He didn't try to stop my coming in. There was a glass shaker of Martinis on the coffee table in front of the fireplace. Our Austin had been drinking alone.

"What's the matter with you? You look sick," I said.

"Is there any news about Erika?" he asked.

"Would I be here if there was? When did you hear she was missing, and how? It hasn't been made public."

"Miss Adams called me."

I should have known Kathy would be miles ahead of me.

"I told her all I know," Austin said. "I bumped into Erika on Fifth Avenue around 6 yesterday, and invited her to the Bijou Club for a cocktail. We sat around for an hour or so. I — I tried to persuade her to have dinner with me, but she said she had another date."

"Who with?"

"She didn't say."

"Why are your hands shaking?" I asked him.

He stuffed them in his pocket. "I'm worried about Erika," he said.

"Why? She's just gone off with some friends and forgot to let us know."

He didn't say anything to that. He just stood there, wetting his lips.

"You got a different theory than that?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

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"Then what are you worried about?"

"Layne being murdered," he said, "and then Erika not turning up."

"You think there's a connection?"

"Look, Vance; I —"

"You've been thick as thieves with Erika for months," I said. "You must know where she went after she left you."

"So help me, Vance, I don't. We separated at the Bijou Club about 7 — and that's the last I saw of her. This noon I read about Layne in the papers. I tried to call Erika at home but the phone was always busy. Finally Miss Adams called me, and I heard Erika hadn't come home last night and was still missing."

"What did you do after Erika left you last night?"

"I — I ate dinner at the Bijou and came back here."

There was something about him I couldn't put my finger on. Concern for Erika was natural, but he acted scared out of his wits.

"Listen, Austin; if I find out you're not telling me everything you know, so help me I'm coming back here and take you apart, piece by piece."

"Why shouldn't I tell you everything I know?" he said.

"I'm darned if I know, Austin, but for some reason you don't smell good to me."

"I swear I've told you everything I know," he said. For a minute I thought he was going to cry. . . .

When I got out into the cool night air again I began to work on really big ideas — technicolor ideas. I started thinking about Joe Ricardo, and the leak from Mike's files, and Ricardo's little frame-up of the phony item. I wondered if Ricardo was playing rough. He might think he could use Erika as a means of twisting Mike's arm, and was waiting for Mike to get good and worried before he put the twist on. My ideas were big, and I felt brave.

I went straight up to Ricardo's hotel suite and asked to see him, which was not much less foolhardy than the Charge of the Light Brigade.

A smooth guy let me into the place and nobody acted tough at all. I had to wait only a minute or two before somebody took me into a small living-room where Ricardo was sitting at a desk going over some papers. Ricardo is strictly not a movie-type mobster. He has gray hair and a friendly face and you can tell he spends time at a gym keeping down his waistline.

"Hello, Vance," he said; "you're too late."

"What do you mean, too late?"

"The cop beat you to it."

"What cop? What are you talking about?"

He looked a little bored with me. "McCuller. What other cop?"

"Look, Joe; let's start over," I said. "And this time make some sense."

Ricardo leaned back in his chair. "Tell Mike I'm surprised at him. He ought to know I always play it strictly on the level."

"Joke," I said, "but I don't get the point."

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"I could get annoyed with you, Vance," Ricardo said. "I would not frame an alibi for anybody, not even my mother. I might need to be believed some day on my own account, so I couldn't risk a phony."

"Frame an alibi?"

"Even if I would have done it, I'm not a mind reader, Vance. If Mike wanted me to say he was here for two hours instead of about 25 minutes he should have said so."

It seemed suddenly very hot in there and Ricardo's face looked blurred. I wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly. "Mike didn't need you to say he'd been here for two hours last night. I said so. I know. I waited for him across the street."

Ricardo's shoulders rose and fell. "I didn't say you weren't across the street for two hours, Vance. But Mike wasn't here for more than 25 minutes and I'm not going to perjure myself to say so. I told McCuller the truth."

"I want to get this straight," I said. "I came in here with Mike. I saw him go up in the elevator. Then I went across the street and waited —"

"There are about five different ways out of this hotel, Vance." He let that sink in for a long time and I swear there was a look of sympathy on his face.

"I don't know what's going on, Vance," he said. "Confidential stuff has been leaking, and I've proved it. Mike has had a reputation for honesty. That's why he gets away with what he gets away with. Now he offers the cops a phony alibi. His ex-son-in-law is murdered, one daughter is arrested for that murder, and the other daughter disappears. I don't know what's going on, as I said. But don't stick your neck out too far, Vance, until you know what you're sticking it out for. That's just common sense."

When I got down into the lobby of Ricardo's hotel I was still trying to juggle times and motives in my head. It had been about midnight when Mike and I went to Ricardo's the night before. That meant that from 12:30, roughly, until 2, when he picked me up in the bar across the street, Mike had been on the loose somewhere. He'd left me sitting in that bar for an hour and a half while he went somewhere he didn't want me to know about. Somewhere like Waldo Layne's room.

A blind anger swept over me. If that was it, then he was deliberately letting Joan take the rap for something he knew she hadn't done! That wasn't like Mike, though. He always played dead level, even with people he had no use for, and he couldn't hate Joan *that* much! But suddenly I had to know what he'd been up to. I couldn't spill anything until I had the answers.

I tried to put myself in his place after his talk with Ricardo, when he'd discovered, without any question, that someone was leaking the stuff out of his files. The story was that somebody had called up Johnson, Ricardo's friend, and tried to blackmail him with the framed story. The somebody

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had been a man. If I'd been Mike, and I wanted to start checking, I'd have gone to see Johnson and asked him about the phone conversation.

Johnson is a theatrical producer and I knew he had an office at the theater where his production of *Underdog* is running. I went there to see him. It was about 40 minutes before curtain time and he was in his office on the second floor of the theater. He wasn't too cordial, but he saw me. He was a nice-looking, fairly young man.

"If Malvern wanted any more information from me he should have come himself," Johnson said.

"I'm here on my own," I said. "If you've heard the news today you know things are pretty messed up in Mike's life."

"That's the understatement of the week."

"Mr. Johnson, did Mike come to see you last night?"

"I ran into him at Lindy's around one o'clock," Johnson said. "I don't know that he was exactly looking for me."

"You talked to him about the blackmail phone call?"

"Yes." Johnson was smiling at me in an odd way.

"Would you repeat the gist of that conversation to me?"

The odd smile widened. "I got a distinct impression, Vance, that he was trying to find out if I'd recognized your voice over the phone."

"*My* voice!"

"That was the gist of it," Johnson said. "I wouldn't get too burned up about it. He'd just had it proved to him that there was a leak somewhere and that a man was involved. You, I take it, are the only man who has access to his confidential records. He'd have to check on you, no matter how much he trusted you, wouldn't he?"

An hour after I left Johnson I went into a quiet little place off Broadway and ordered myself some food and coffee. I'd done some more checking and I began to understand why I'd been left sitting in that bar across from Ricardo's hotel twiddling my thumbs. Mike had been investigating me! He must have had some idea of other items that had leaked. Two or three guys who were usually very friendly with me had acted queer and reserved. Mike's questions had left them wondering about me.

It hit me hard to discover that Mike had doubted me so actively. Well, it didn't matter. I was clean and he must know it by now. Also, though his two-hour alibi at Ricardo's wouldn't hold up, I'd discovered half a dozen places he'd been in that time. There were gaps in it — big enough to make a short visit to Waldo possible — but it was still a pretty good alibi.

Alibis made me think of Charley Carson, Mike's lawyer. He should have seen Joan by now if he'd acted on Kathy's call. I had his private number in my pocket notebook and I dialed it from a booth in the restaurant. Carson is one of the topflight boys in his trade, and his particular specialty, as far as Mike was concerned, was a vast knowledge of the libel laws. He

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worked on a retainer for Mike, and any time there was anything the least bit touchy in one of the columns, Carson saw it before the proof was okayed.

"Hi, Vance," he said, over the phone. "You been talking to Kathy?"

"Not recently. Why?"

"I've been trying to reach you. Kathy said you were out on the town somewhere. Can you come over to my place for a few minutes?"

"Sure. How's Joan? You've seen her?"

"I've seen her," Carson said. "Get over here, will you, son?"

Carson lives on Central Park South, a fancy penthouse overlooking Central Park. He's a big, fat, easygoing guy who likes the good things of life, and earns them by being sharp and hard as nails at his job. He let me in himself and took me into his library. He was wearing a silk lounging robe and smoking a cigar that smelled like about two dollars' worth.

"I understand Mike has blown his top over this thing," he said, as he settled himself in the armchair back of his desk.

"Things are rough," I said. "Erika missing. Joan charged with murder. Somebody stealing stuff from his files."

Carson has the heavy, hooded eyes of a gambler. You can never read in them what he is thinking. "I didn't know until after I'd seen Joan that he hadn't wanted me called."

"He was pretty hard hit about then. He'll have calmed down when he hears about it."

"He has heard about it. He told me to lay off."

"What are you going to do?" I said.

"I told him to go fly a kite," Carson said. "I told him Joan had retained me personally."

"Good for her," I said.

"Of course she didn't. That's where you come in, Vance. I want you to go see her and tell her I'm working for her, not her father."

"What'll she use for money?" I asked bitterly.

"Who said anything about money?" The hooded eyes turned my way. "You ought to have your behind kicked," Carson said amiably.

"I? What have I done?"

"You've been mooning around over Joan for a couple of years," he said. "I had an idea you were really in love with her."

"I was — only, she wouldn't give me the time of day."

"Was?" His bushy gray eyebrows rose.

"I don't know where I'm at right now," I said. "Waldo Layne! When I think of her — and Waldo —"

"I'll be glad to do that kicking right now," Carson said. "You never loved that girl. If you did you'd know what kind of a person she is."

"I thought I did."

"Would the girl you loved have given Waldo Layne the time of day?"

"I wouldn't have thought so. But —"

"You wouldn't have thought so!

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You fathead! What's changed her?"

"I don't know. I —"

"Nothing changed her!" he said emphatically. "She was no more in love with Waldo Layne than I am. And I handled his divorce and know just the special kind of louse he was."

"But —"

"You sound like an outboard motor! But, but, but. Why don't you use your heart and your head? Why is she telling this cock-and-bull story?"

"There's no question that she went to the hotel," I said.

"Who said there was? She was there, she found Layne dead, she ran away, she phoned in the alarm. All those things happened. But she hasn't said why she went or what it was all about. Of course, you and Mike, who love her, are perfectly prepared to believe she could care for a heel like Waldo."

I felt a lump in my throat. "Mr. Carson, you really don't think she —?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" he said impatiently. "I've known Joan since she was toddling around in a baby-walker. I'm not in love with her, but apparently I know her better than those of you who are supposed to be." He paused, and I had to look down, because my eyes felt hot and salty. Then he went on in a matter-of-fact tone: "Frankly, I couldn't get anywhere near the truth from her, Vance. She kept repeating that silly story about Waldo. Maybe you can break her down."

"I'd like to try," I said.

"Good. I'm going to give you an authorization for her to sign, retaining me as her counsel. I'll arrange for you to see her now. Okay?"

"Wonderful," I said. "One thing, Mr. Carson — about the revolver. The fact that it's missing is damaging, isn't it?"

"Don't tell me that along with your other asininities you think she shot Waldo?"

"No, of course not. All the same —"

"Until they find the gun and ballistics proves it was the one that killed Waldo it's just a gleam in McCuller's eye. Good heavens, do I have to tell you again? She didn't kill Waldo. She wasn't in love with him. She's covering for someone, and I wonder if I have to tell you who that is, too?"

"Erika?"

"Dear, sweet, lovable, little Erika." Carson's voice dripped acid. "But you don't know the girl you love, so how could you know Erika?"

"I think I know her," I said.

"A greedy, self-interested —" He jammed out his cigar in an ash tray on the desk. "She's a cannibal, Vance. She's been feeding off people all her life — off Mike, off Joan, off her friends, off Waldo. You know, I actually felt sorry for Waldo when he fell into that trap. It served his chiseling soul right, but I wouldn't wish Erika on my worst enemy. She sucks you dry and leaves you for the Sanitation Department to collect with the morning trash. As I said, she's a cannibal." He smiled grimly. "Well, maybe this time she over-ate!"

"But what could Joan be covering?"

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"Vance, you can't read anything but the large print, can you? Who *did* kill Waldo?"

Carson had been a shot in the arm to me. Why hadn't I relied on my certainty about Joan instead of accepting her story? Well, maybe it wasn't going to be too late to make it up to her.

I picked up a paper on the corner and then took a taxi downtown to where they were holding Joan. I turned the ceiling light on in the cab and looked at the front page. Waldo had made it, with pictures. There was a background piece on his marriage to Erika and, of course, some mention of Mike. But there was nothing about Erika being missing. If McCuller had sent out a general alarm, as he threatened, it hadn't been picked up by the newspaper boys, at least for this edition.

I was about to put the paper down when I noticed a follow-up story on the fire at the Spain. All but three of the twelve dead had been claimed by relatives or friends — two men and one woman. The unclaimed body of the woman was assumed to be that of Eloise Morton, Joan's friend. That was odd, I thought, because Joan had been on her way to break the news to the Morton girl's family when she'd left me at the Spain. The answer, I figured, was that the girl wasn't Eloise Morton. Then I read the piece over again. No one had come forward to identify the body assumed to be Eloise Morton's! The reporters must have slipped on that one.

Instead of the regular visiting cage at the jail I was ushered into a captain's office.

"McCuller's orders," I heard one of the cops say.

Five minutes later they brought Joan in and left us alone. Poor darling, she looked all in. I didn't say anything, but I did something I'd never dared do before. I walked over to her and put my arms around her, and the next thing I knew she was clinging to me and her whole body was shaken with sobs. I just hung on to her and stroked her hair and let her cry it out. Finally I gave her my handkerchief to blow with, and that made her smile a little; and then I moved her over and sat her down in the swivel chair at the captain's desk.

"Listen," I said. "For two years I've been wandering around like a smooch waiting for you to give me some kind of sign before I said anything to you. Well, I quit! I'm telling you, sign or no sign, that I love you, that I was a fool to believe that line of yours about Waldo, and that I'm going to keep on loving you whether you like it or not."

"Oh, Vance," she said shakily.

"Sign this," I said, and put Carson's authorization down on the desk in front of her. "It's a technicality," I told her. "Carson has to have this to show you want him on your side." No use telling her Mike had walked out on her. Mike would be back, I told myself.

She signed the authorization and I put it in my pocket. I pulled up a straight chair and sat down.

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"Now let's start this thing over from the beginning," I said. "Why did you go to the Wakefield to see Waldo last night?"

She turned her face away.

"Look, darling, I'm sure you have a reason for telling the story you did," I said. "But I'm Vance, remember? You can tell me what the real reason was."

"I can't," she said, her face still turned away.

My heart did a bump against my ribs. Those two words were an admission that she'd been lying.

"Where's Erika?" I asked her quietly.

Her head turned quickly back to me and I saw that her eyes were wide with fright. "You know where she is, don't you?"

She just stared at me, and I tried again: "She killed Waldo?"

"No!" It was just a whisper.

"What is it, darling? Did you suspect she was going to do it, and get there too late to stop her?"

"No. Erika didn't kill him, Vance. She couldn't have!"

"But you thought she might and you went there to warn him?"

"No."

"Joan, for heaven's sake, let me have it straight!"

She shook her head slowly. "I can't, Vance. I wish I could."

"You don't trust me?"

"With my life," she said. She gave me a little twisted smile. "If you were to ask for it."

I kissed her on the mouth then. We didn't say anything for quite a while.

"We'll announce it right away," I said. "That'll kill this other story."

"No, Vance. We'll have to wait."

"For what?"

"For things to be cleared up," she said. "Please, darling, don't keep asking me to tell you something I can't tell you."

"If it isn't Erika you're protecting, who is it? Is it Mike? Because he's got an almost foolproof alibi."

"Please, Vance, it has to be this way," she said.

I could see I wasn't going to break her down then, at least. "You better get as much rest and sleep as you possibly can," I said. "McCuller will probably start to work on you when he wakes up. Don't talk unless Carson is here."

"I won't talk," she said.

I reached in my pocket for a cigarette, and felt the folded newspaper. "Oh, by the way — there's a piece in the paper tonight that mentions your friend, Eloise Morton."

"Who?" Joan said.

"Eloise Morton, the girl at the Spain!"

"Oh."

"It says no one has claimed her body. Didn't you get in touch with her parents?"

"I?"

"You were going to get in touch with her parents when I left you this morning."

Joan had been pale when I arrived. Now her face was the color of chalk. "Oh, yes," she said.

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"You saw them?"

"No — no, they're out of town."

"Look, honey; you better tell me where they live, so the department can get things straightened out."

She just stared at me. She moistened her lips, but she didn't say anything.

"Darling, what is it? I know it's hard for you, but if you'll give me the Mortons' address I'll handle it for you."

She twisted her body around in the chair as though she was suddenly in mortal pain.

Then it hit me, right between the eyes, and it had been there all day for me to see and I had been too stupid to see it. Eloise Morton — E. M. Erika Malvern — E. M. The grief and panic on Joan's face when I'd met her in the lobby of the Spain. The death of a school friend *could* have shocked her that much, but surely it would have had to be a close friend, someone Mike or the rest of us would have heard of.

I took Joan by the shoulders. I had to push my breath out hard to make a sound. "Erika?" I asked her.

She didn't have to answer. It was there in her eyes.

Joan didn't cry. It would have been almost better if she could have. Now that it was out between us, she talked, dry-eyed. It wasn't a pretty story.

Most of the people who stayed at the Spain were permanent residents, elderly, not too well off. There was no smart bar or cocktail lounge. You just wouldn't go there unless you knew someone who lived there.

Joan had been doing some volunteer work at one of the hospitals and had made friends with one of the patients, a little old woman who lived at the Spain. When this woman was released from the hospital she made Joan promise to come and see her, and only yesterday Joan had kept that promise. As she was crossing the lobby to the desk she ran smack into Erika. They went through a "What are you doing here?" routine. It seemed they had both come to visit someone.

Erika was just starting out when a bellboy came up to her. "There's a phone call for you, Miss Morton," he said. "Do you want it in the booth, or shall I have them hold it till you get up to your room?"

I guess the way the boy said it, his smile, his ready recognition, made it impossible for Erika to bluff it out. She took Joan upstairs to her room and there she told her:

"You and I are different, Joan. You're satisfied to live the way we do — in a goldfish bowl. Because of father and his business everything we do is watched and commented on. You're content to wait till the right man comes along, marry him, and live happily ever after. I've *been* married, and I can't go back to be treated like a schoolgirl. I want some privacy. I want some independence. So I come here occasionally and stay under another name — Eloise Morton."

She'd chosen a name with the same initials because her accessories, bags, handkerchiefs, were monogrammed. She said there was no harm in it. It

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was just that Mike insisted on choosing her friends for her, making her plans for her. She wanted some part of her life, she said, where she could make her own friends and be out from under Mike's supervision, loving as it might be.

Joan was shocked but, being Joan, she tried to understand. She could understand how, after a year of complete independence, Erika might find Mike's chaperonage chafing from time to time. Erika tried to make her promise she wouldn't say anything to Mike. Joan wouldn't promise, but she did say she'd think about it and tell Erika before she went to Mike, if that was her decision.

"Last night I was in bed," Joan said, "but I couldn't get to sleep. Kathy had gone to bed. About one o'clock the phone rang. I picked it up quickly so the ringing wouldn't disturb Kathy. It was Waldo. He sounded as though he'd been drinking. He wanted to talk to Erika. I told him she wasn't home. Then he said, 'I know I can count on you, Joan, to keep your mouth shut. Find her, Joan, and tell her I've got to see her. Tell her if she doesn't get in touch with me within two hours — by three o'clock — I'm going to tell Mike Malvern she's been using his confidential files for a cozy little racket. I have a hunch he might slap even Erika down for that kind of double-cross. And tell her that goes for her play-writing boy-friend, too.'

"I wanted to ask him more, but I heard, or thought I heard, the click of one of the extension phones. I didn't want Kathy to hear what Waldo was saying. . . . Oh, Vance, I knew then that Erika and Austin Graves must be using Mike's confidential material for blackmail. Erika was with Mike so often when he picked up stories; she even made the records for his file. It wouldn't have been too hard for her to discover the combination to the vault. And he loves her so, Vance. He loves her so that the possibility would never enter his head. He thought of you, he thought of Kathy — people whose loyalty is beyond question. He never thought of Erika."

"Whose loyalty was even farther beyond question," I said.

Joan nodded. "Excitement was like a disease to her," Joan said. "Even as a little girl she'd do crazy things, just for the thrill of it. She didn't need money — Mike would give her all she needs. But she would steal information from Mike and blackmail people with it — just because it was dangerous, and because she liked to control people. Mike has power, you know, but he uses it for good. Erika wanted it to use for excitement, for thrills." Joan took a deep breath. "I knew Waldo wasn't fooling, Vance. I didn't know if Erika was still at the Spain, but I took a chance and called there. I couldn't get a connection."

"The fire," I said.

Joan nodded. "Of course, I had no way of knowing whether she was there. I tried all the friends I could think of, without any luck. I tried her favorite night spots. Then, without any particular plan, I got dressed and

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went out on the town looking for her. Around half-past two I hadn't found her. I was beginning to get panicky about Waldo. I called the Wakefield, but his room didn't answer. He'd said Erika was to get in touch with him there by three, so I thought maybe he'd be there again. I — I went there just as I've told you, and found him. I just wanted him to hold off, not do anything crazy until we located Erika."

"Poor baby," I said.

"Then, this morning, there was no word from Erika — and all the talk from Mike about the leak. I'd read about the fire at the Spain, but there was no list of the injured or dead in the early editions. As soon as I could get free I went over there — as you know."

"But, Joan, darling, why didn't you just tell this as you've told it to me?"

For the first time her eyes filled with tears. "Vance, you don't know what it's like not to be loved by someone you love and need. Mike has never forgiven me because my mother died giving birth to me. He's never been unfair, but he's never loved me. It's been Erika, always Erika, he adored. I couldn't be the one to tell him the truth about her. He would hate me even more for knowing. When I knew this morning that Erika was dead I knew I'd never tell him. It may never have to come out now, Vance."

"It'll have to. I —"

"You're not going to tell, Vance."

"But, Joan —"

"I didn't kill Waldo, so they can't prove it. They'll have to let me go after a while. The chances are they'll never identify what's left of Erika unless they're given a lead, and they're not going to get it from you or me. It's better for Mike that she should just disappear. In time he'll convince himself it was some underworld enemy of his who did away with her. Anything would be better than that he should know she never really loved him and that she quite calmly betrayed him."

"And you'd let him go on thinking that you and Waldo —?"

"What does it matter? He can't have less regard for me than he's always had."

I shook my head. I felt a little groggy. "Joan, how do you know Erika didn't kill Waldo? You were so positive about it."

She looked at me, her eyes wide. "But, darling, don't you see? Waldo called at one o'clock. As soon as he hung up I called the Spain. It was on fire then, and she was there, trapped!"

It was about midnight when I left Joan. I felt as if I'd been beaten around the head. I remembered I'd promised Carson I'd call him when I got through talking to her. I went into a drugstore and rang him.

"I don't know any more than I did when I left you," I said.

"You're lying," he said cheerfully.

"Oh, she's hiding something," I said, "but I don't know what it is."

"Ought to have your mouth washed out with soap," Carson said. "You talked to the woman for three hours

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and all you did was tell her you loved her?"

Three hours!

"You're wrong about one thing, though, Mr. Carson," I said. "Erika didn't kill Waldo."

"How do you know?"

"I can't tell you," I said, "but that's one thing I did find out."

"*Was* it Joan?"

"No, you idiot!"

"Okay, Romeo; have it your way," Carson said. "But remember one thing: Joan is safe in jail with her secret. You're walking around loose with it. Somebody might not like that."

"But I tell you she didn't —"

"Tell it to the Marines," Carson said.

So I took a cab uptown, nursing my headache and my secret, and thinking about what Carson had said. Someone — the someone who had shot Waldo — might be watching to make certain no one got on his trail. I know I had some weird ideas on the trip uptown. I thought first that maybe Ricardo had discovered that Waldo was in the know, and that Waldo had been making a nuisance of himself. So Ricardo had had Waldo rubbed out! It was a nice, clean, simple answer and didn't hurt anybody I loved. But then I had a picture of one of Ricardo's boys blasting someone with a woman's toy revolver. With Joan's revolver, because I was unpleasantly convinced that the missing gun was the one McCuller needed to convict her.

The whole thing kept coming back to us — to Mike, and me, to Erika, and Joan, and Kathy. We were the only ones who could have taken that gun out of Joan's drawer and used it, and Erika had to be eliminated because she hadn't had a chance to use it. She was being broiled alive when Waldo was killed. Not me. I knew that, if no one else did. Not Joan. And how on earth did Kathy fit into the picture? She loved Mike; she might have overheard Waldo's phone call to Joan and she would protect Mike from hurt if she could, but to commit a murder just to protect the man you loved from having his feelings hurt — that was hard to take.

That left Mike.

As I thought about it I could feel the small hairs rising on the back of my neck. To begin with, Mike no longer had a real alibi. He could have been at the Wakefield. He certainly could have taken Joan's gun, although he had one of his own that he was licensed to carry. Motive? Well, there were a dozen ways to figure that. There was one simple one: Suppose Waldo had gotten in touch with Mike last night — after he'd talked to Joan. Suppose Mike had gone to his room at the Wakefield and Waldo had said to him, "Mike, Erika is the one who's been stealing your stuff and blackmailing people with it." Mike hates Waldo, figures he can handle Erika himself, so he draws his gun and lets Waldo have it. But not his gun — Joan's gun. The use of Joan's gun suggested premeditation, a scheme.

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I tried another tack: Waldo didn't get in touch with Mike, but Mike, on his rounds, ran into something that convinced him Waldo was part of the blackmail setup. He could put two and two together. It would have to be Erika who was working with him. So he goes to the Wakefield and plugs Waldo, covering his tracks by using that little revolver which would have the police looking for a woman. And deliberately put Joan on the spot?

Oh, brother! But nonetheless, where could you go but Mike? Where could you possibly go but Mike?

The palms of my hands were damp when I paid off the driver and walked up the steps to Mike's house. I had a key, of course, and let myself in. There was a light on in the library and I could see through into Mike's study. There was a light on there, and though he would usually be out on the town at this time, it didn't surprise me he was there now.

I remember I stood in the entrance hall and lit a cigarette. I was trying to figure out just what I'd say to him, just how I'd go about talking to him without involving Joan. Even then I wasn't kidding myself about being a detective. There was probably something quite obvious that would clear Mike entirely. Actually, I hadn't done anything like a complete check on his alibi. Maybe it would turn out to be airtight. McCuller had probably checked it already and found it was okay, or Mike wouldn't be running around loose. Well, the first thing to do was find out if I was fired.

I walked through the library to the study. The door to the vault where he kept his files was open and I could hear him puttering around in there. I walked over to his desk, put out my cigarette, and lit another one. I could hear the file drawers open and close. He was hunting for something special, I imagined. Well, Kathy did the filing, not me.

I sat down in the chair beside his desk and closed my eyes. They felt hot and tired. It had been the longest day of my life, measured in stresses and strains.

Then I opened my eyes again, and saw her standing in the vault door.

"Don't move, Vance," she said. "I've got to think this out."

It was Erika! She was pointing the little .22 at me, her gray-green eyes as bright as diamonds.

The room began to do a slow, rhythmic spin. I've never fainted in my life, but I imagine I was as close to it then as I'll ever be. The spinning stopped and Erika came back into focus. She had the gun in one hand and she had a small suitcase in the other.

"I counted on your being out with Mike," she said. Her red lips moved in a smile. "Looking for me!"

"That's what Mike is probably doing," I said. I could feel anger beginning to rise up in me, hot, blind anger.

"Poor darling," she said.

"I've seen Joan tonight," I said. "She's taking a rap for you, too."

"My luck's been so good up to

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now," she said. "It seems to be changing. Joan told you things?"

"Joan told me things."

"She's protecting Mike, of course. How very noble and self-effacing."

"She thinks you're dead," I said. "She's not protecting you."

The gray-green eyes narrowed. "She *did* tell you things."

I began to think in terms of feet and inches then. I was about eight feet away from her. I wondered how accurate she could be with that popgun if I made a dive for her.

"Yes, my luck has gone very bad," Erika said. "Sooner or later I knew she'd tell someone about the Spain. The fire was my first piece of luck. I wasn't there, but someone died in my room — probably someone who got caught in the hallway and ran in there for safety. Joan would talk, I thought, and my passing would be duly mourned. You see, don't you, how your coming home is very bad luck, Vance, darling?"

"You killed Waldo?"

"Waldo was far too greedy," she said.

"I made a mistake tonight, myself," I said. "I had a chance to break Austin Graves' neck and I didn't. He is your partner in blackmail, isn't he?"

"Poor Austin, he's probably half dead of fright by this time," Erika said. "He started shaking last week when Waldo accidentally caught on to our little pastime."

"I can understand why," I said. "Who tipped you off that Waldo was going to spill to Mike?"

"I heard his chat with Joan on the library extension. I had just come in. I thought Joan and Kathy were asleep." She smiled. "Needless to say, I went right out again to — to calm him down, shall we say?" Her eyes narrowed. "You know, Vance, perhaps your being here now is providential. I can tell Mike I found you rifling the vault, and when you tried to get away I shot you."

"With the gun you used to kill Waldo? It will be hard to explain."

She laughed. "Darling, I'm not a complete child," she said. "I took Joan's gun a long time ago, in case of emergencies. I used it to kill Waldo and it's at the bottom of a Broadway sewer at this moment. This one hasn't been used to kill anyone — until now."

"And Joan? Are you going to kill Joan, too?"

"Why? Poor Joan — always behind the eight ball. I admit, Vance dear, to the horrible sin of leading a double life. I expose you as the double-crosser. Mike will forgive me, after he's scolded me. He will be grateful to me for stopping the leak — by putting a bullet in you. It will be my word against Joan's. Who does Mike always listen to?"

I tried getting my feet under me so I could make a fast move. Erika was thinking this out all too clearly.

"You're a nice boy, Vance," she said. "It's really too bad for you it had to happen this way. But when you get into the kind of jam I'm in you have to get out of it."

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I made my move then, without much hope. Waiting would get me no place. I dived forward, as low and hard as I could. The gun went off, and the sound of it was much louder than I'd expected. I didn't feel anything, except the jar of my shoulder against her knees, and then she went down, and I fumbled frantically for her right hand.

"Vance!"

It was Mike! I turned my head and saw him standing over me. At the same moment I heard a moaning noise from Erika, and I saw the little .22 lying a couple of feet away on the polished floor. I reached for it, and rolled clear of Erika and stood up. I saw her right hand, shattered and bloody.

Mike had a gun in his hand. It was his gun I had heard, not Erika's. Mike's face was the color of ashes, set in hard anger such as I'd never seen it. He made no move to help Erika.

She played it, right to the end: "Father, you don't understand. Vance was in the vault. I found him there. I—"

"Call McCuller," Mike said to me.

I went to the desk and started dialing police headquarters. William, attracted by the shot, came running from the kitchen.

"Get the first-aid kit from upstairs," Mike said to him.

Erika, clinging to her injured hand, struggled up to her feet. Mike made no move to help her. I got police headquarters on the phone and told them to send McCuller.

"Father, you've got to listen to me," Erika said.

"I have been listening to you," Mike said, "for the last five minutes."

William came in with the first-aid kit.

"Do what you can for her, William," Mike said. Then he turned and walked slowly and steadily away into the library.

I went after him. He was standing by the fireplace, looking down into the dead coals in the grate.

"I'm sorry, Mike," I said.

He didn't answer, for a moment. Then he whirled around on me. "What's the matter with me?" he cried. "People are my business! I'm supposed to know people — understand them! Until I heard her talking I'd never seen her before in my life."

"Maybe you just saw her as a replica of somebody else," I said. "Because you wanted it that way so badly."

He reached out to me. "Vance, do you suppose Joan will ever understand? Is there any way I can ever make it up to her?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said. "She's quite a girl."

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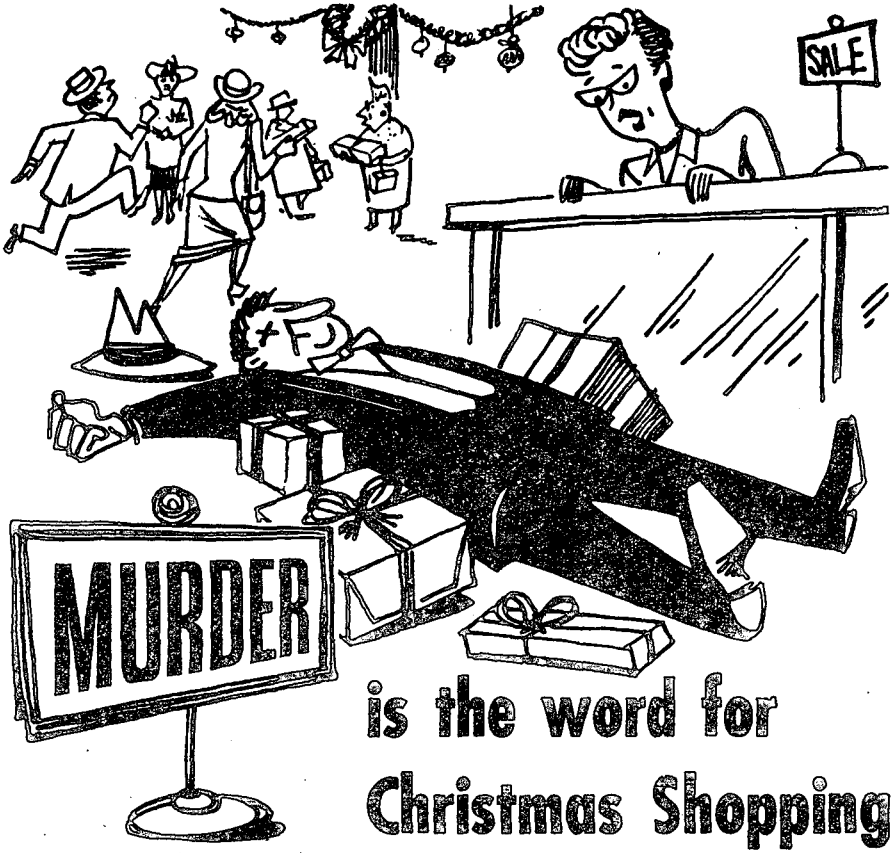

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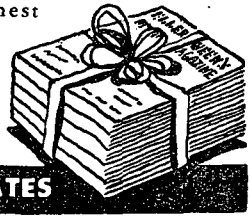

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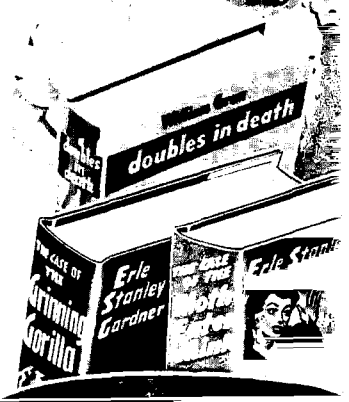

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